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OLDFORKED- LIGHTNING THE SOLITARY OR EVERY INCH A MAN, By JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEXTON AND THE GRAVE.

WITH a shrug of his shoulders that was almost a shiver, Fremont Metcalf muttered half-audibly:

"That out-Herod's Herod! Is it an omen? Will the search which begins in a grave, end in a grave?"

It was but a momentary chill which fell over his strong young spirit. With an effort he brushed away the disagreeable sensation, a trace of amused contempt curling his red lips as he gazed steadily across the unpaved street.

A bright light hung above the entrance to a rude, unpainted wooden structure, and that light was protected by glass and a metal frame, shaped like a coffin!

This in itself might possibly have escaped notice, but that there might be no room left for mistake to creep in at, the artist had been called on to add his quota with brush and colors.

On the glass front was pictured a corpse in its winding sheet, with closed eyes, bandaged jaws

and folded hands, lying on the cooling-board. And seated opposite each other, with the corpse between them, playing cards upon his bosom, were drawn with no mean skill conventional figures of grim death and the foul fiend!

Above this weird conception was the brief legend "THE GRAVE." Below, in smaller letters, "Gabriel Sexton."

Through the windows and open door came a reddish light. Within could be heard loud, coarse voices. And even across the rough, narrow street could be distinguished the peculiar smell of stale liquors which so plainly indicates the vicinity of a drinking saloon of the baser sort.

"In a civilized community that would not be suffered, or, if permitted, such a sign would serve as a beacon of danger to even the most hardened and reckless! But here—where all is naturally 'wild and woolly,' hyperbole takes the place of reason, the antelope grows wings and the eagle uses a telescope."

As he muttered, Fremont Metcalf mechanically assured himself that his weapons were ready to his hand, then crossed the rough street, pushing aside the pivoted screen which filled the doorway, crossing the threshold of "The Grave!"

He was confronted by fresh evidence of the morbid genius which had evolved that repulsive swinging sign without, and more than ever was he convinced that "it takes all sorts of people to make up a world!"

In one respect it was the ordinary drinking and gambling-saloon of a mining-town. Both bar and tables were well patronized, considering the earliness of the hour. For the most part these customers consisted of laborers employed at the various quartz mines adjoining town; rough and ready fellows whose main idea of earthly felicity appeared to be drink, smoke and noise without limit. The exceptions were few, but easily recognized even by an eye so new to life in the wild West as that of our young friend.

Here and there were scattered men of different dress, different looks, different manners. Some were plainly citizens of the better class, and equally clear others were gamblers, bearing the brand which is so readily recognized by the man of the world, but which is so difficult to describe in words.

His first swift, comprehensive glance showed Fremont Metcalf this, and then his eyes were arrested by the peculiar ornamentation of both bar and room. Peculiar, indeed!

In all, nearly a score of framed pictures were hung upon the whitewashed walls of the bar-room, some large, some small; but each one pointing more or less plainly to the same goal—the grave.

The majority were rude crayons and flashy lithographs, dolorously comic or ridiculously serious in their treatment, but the main subject was ever the same: death or the grave.

Here and there were scattered a few drawings of more merit, bird's-eye views of prominent cemeteries, sketches of tombs and mausoleums.

Nor had the bar proper escaped its share of this morbid ornamentation. At either end stood plaster statuettes of death with scythe and hour-glass. In the center of the shelf which supported the glassware, stood a china vaulted tomb, before the grated door of which knelt two red-winged and yellow-haired angels in attitude of prayer. The frames of the three large mirrors were draped with black crape, as was also the frame of a portrait which hung above them.

In startling contrast was the pictured face which beamed forth from that oval inclosure; fat, rosy, jolly, with a twinkle in the little blue eyes so natural that one involuntarily caught himself looking for the humorous wink which it seemed must follow in kindly greeting.

"Not bad, is it?" came in a wheezy yet oily chuckle, so close to the ear of the young man that he gave a start. "Not bad, if I do say it, which I hadn't order!"

Fremont Metcalf wheeled quickly, and gave another start as he found himself face to face with the original of the crape-draped portrait.

A fat, roly-poly body that corresponded admirably with the jolly face upon which he had been gazing. A trifle redder tinge to the puffy cheeks, perhaps; a thought higher forehead, where the flaxen curls had grown thinner; a turn-down collar instead of the stiff choker and black stock; otherwise it might have been the portrait come down to reunite with its proper body.

There was a vast expanse of ruffled and embroidered shirt-bosom, adorned rather than protected by the short-sleeved and scant-skirted jacket of Mexican cut; this of blue velvet, with double rows of gilt buttons and gold lace. Trousers of snowy white duck, stiffly starched, met gorgeous red hose, which in turn were lost in patent-leather pumps, the toes of which were ornamented with silken bows and gold buckles. All forming such a peculiar combination of age and juvenility that Fremont Metcalf could not help smiling broadly.

The fat little fellow nodded, tapping his pug nose with the tip of a pudgy finger as he whispered, confidentially:

"Business, my dear sir! It takes, you see!"

Metcalf cast an involuntary glance around him, to be arrested by that stumpy finger hooking itself in a buttonhole.

"Stranger in town, I reckon!" came that peculiar whisper. "Hardly know how to take it? Well, I'm not surprised. Strikes most persons the same way, at first sight. But not when they get down to bed-rock—no, sir! Beg pardon—forgot to introduce myself. Oblige me—yours truly!"

With a scrape and a bow that would have done credit to a professional dancing-master, the little roll of fat produced a stiff square of pasteboard. Fremont Metcalf mechanically accepted and glanced at it. In blackest ink was the representation of a heavily-plumed hearse. It was the business-card of Gabriel Sexton, undertaker.

"A relic of the past, my dear sir," wheezed the fat man, producing a black silk handkerchief and blowing a sonorous blast with its aid that turned his little nose a still more fiery red. "Of the days when yours truly was something better than a mere gin-slinger. Ah, sir, if I could only have known you then! If you could have seen me in my glory—but why repine? Am I not still a man and a scholar and a gentleman?"

"I see no reason to doubt it, certainly," replied Metcalf as the little fellow stared almost fiercely into his face.

"Thank you—a thousand thanks, my dear sir!" and Gabriel Sexton bowed like a nodding mandarin, smiling all over his face. "The good opinion of a high-toned gent is very precious to me now, though, mind you, I do not admit having descended from my former high estate. No sir! Any low, common trash can sell liquor and run a game of chance, but it takes a genius to make it both a success and respectable. And I do both. As you see, I blend the moral with the practical. I appeal to the minds and hearts of men, even while I attend to their stomachs in a purely business way. You have noticed my humble efforts at ornamentation, I believe?"

Metcalf nodded. He hardly knew what to say. This Gabriel Sexton was an odd fish, truly.

The fat host cast one proud glance around at his works of art; another more crafty look as though to make sure there were no other ears inconveniently nigh; then added in a confidential whisper:

"That's the way I talk to ordinary men, my dear sir, but with you—between gentlemen, you know—ahem! It's all gas! You have my card. You know that I was once an undertaker. I failed in it—failed most ingloriously, sir! And why? Because I grew too fat—because I could not draw down my face to the proper depth of lugubrious mourning, sir, without hanging weights to both cheeks! People said I was growing fat on corpses—that I was a ghoul—fact!"

Such an utter disgust was written on that face and echoed from that voice, that Metcalf could not keep from smiling.

"And so you abandoned the business?"

"No sir; the business abandoned me! Nobody wanted to be buried by such a monument of health and good nature. I sold out at a sacrifice, and drifted West, to grow up with the country. There is little for men of my profession to do out here. They bury men in their boots and old clothes, and pay the undertaker with a bottle of old rye! And so—you see!"

With a shrug of his shoulders and an outward fling of his stumpy arms, Gabriel Sexton viewed his surroundings, melancholy pride in every inch of his person.

Aside from his growing interest in a character such as he had never chanced to meet before, Fremont Metcalf was in no haste to cut the interview short. He had peculiar reasons for being at the saloon, and his object could be gained thus as well, if not better, as by any other means.

"A contrast, truly, my dear sir," he said, quietly. "Yet one would think you still longed for your first love, from the manner in which you have fitted out your place. Of course you are the best judge, but don't you think you are carrying it a little too far?"

"Too far? Not a bit! It attracts attention—awakens curiosity, and curiosity is provocative of thirst. See? People come to stare, and stay to drink. The name of my place? Well, it matches well with my own name. Sexton always makes one think of the grave. And Gabriel, too—last trump, you know. That takes in the card-tables. All appropriate. Then again: everybody must come to the grave sooner or later—see? And then it gives the would-be wits such a prime chance to ring in their old chestnuts, and they are always willing to pay for an extra drink for the chance of calling for coffin-varnish, for another nail, a screw, a door-plate, etc. See?"

"Then you find it pays better than undertaking?"

"Even if I hadn't been sure of it before, that question would proclaim you a stranger in Canaan," laughed Sexton. "Ask any business man in town, and they'll tell you I'm coining

money—and I'll never give them the lie—no, sir! Of course you don't want to buy!"

Metcalf shook his head laughingly.

"Thought not. No harm to ask, though. Saw you when stage came in. Lady with you. Wife, I reckon?"

"My sister," was the short reply.

"Married, perhaps? Husband in the mines somewhere?"

"Neither."

"Ah!" with an indrawn breath and sparkle of the little eyes as he smoothed his bosom.

"You must be on your guard, my dear fellow, or you'll lose her sure."

Fremont Metcalf bit his lip, his cheeks flushing slightly, his voice cold and hard as he made reply:

"I don't understand you, sir."

"You will before your hair turns gray"—with an oily chuckle that somehow did not sound near so pleasant to the ears of the young man as when he first heard it. "She's too terribly good-looking to remain single long in a camp where the fair sex is so much in the—"

"We will drop this subject, if you please," sharply interposed the young man. "I am not accustomed to discuss ladies in saloons, much less my own sister."

Gabriel Sexton wiped the cunning smile from his face with a single sweep of the sable silk, bowing humbly as he said:

"Beg pardon—meant no offense, I assure you. Forgot you were a stranger. Take something with me, to wash away all hard feelings—do!"

Unconsciously to himself, Metcalf had raised his voice until its clear, stern accents had attracted attention, and now as he glanced around, he met several pair of eyes curiously watching them. As the shortest method of averting this unwelcome attention, he bowed in acceptance of the invitation.

"That's hearty!" exclaimed Gabriel, his face once more wreathed in smiles. "Needn't be afraid of poison—private bottle—take a little myself, for stomach's sake—sabe?"

With a gait of a fat duck in a hurry, Gabriel Sexton waddled behind the counter and stooped to procure his own particular brand of liquor. Metcalf advanced more slowly, and was yet a little distance from the bar when the door was filled with a noisy group, and a shrill squeal drew all eyes in that direction.

A tall, athletic figure strode in advance of its fellows and struck an attitude in the center of the cleared space before the bar. With thumbs thrust under his armpits, fingers beating a tattoo on his broad chest, while his elbows flapped rapidly after the fashion of a pair of wings, the rough uttered a shrill cock crow, then leaped high into the air, cracking his heels together thrice ere they again struck the floor.

"Hyar I be, Romeo Bugg from Spiderville, with a rooster 'tween my smokestacks an' a nigger squatin' on the safety-valve—feedin' bacon an' tar-pentine, an' divil a drop o' water in my b'ilers—whoop-ee!"

It was a somewhat confused metaphor, but the spirit which prompted its utterance was sufficiently clear to all. The "bad man" was under the influence of worse whisky just sufficiently to render him quarrelsome. He was "on his muscle," roaming around in search of some one daring enough to "knock the chip off his shoulder!"

Only for the hard, reckless expression on his face, he would have been a good-looking fellow.

Athletic in build, his motions were quick and lithe as those of a panther. A heavy beard and mustaches covered the larger portion of his face, while long locks of the same golden hue fell in curls to his broad shoulders. His eyes were large and blue, though the whites were slightly bloodshot from hard drinking. His garb was that of a miner, soiled and stained. A leather belt encircled his waist, filled with cartridges and supporting a pair of navy-size revolvers and a horn-handled knife.

But the most remarkable thing about him remains to be mentioned. His person was thickly studded with bugs and spiders of all shapes and sizes, fastened to his clothes and hat with strings and pins. Bugs, from the huge and hideous stag-beetle down to the phosphorescent "lightning-bug;" spiders from the least of its race to the hairy tarantula; while dangling from the brim of his felt hat were several fat-bodied praying-mantises and slender "walking-sticks."

At the sound of that shrill crow, Gabriel Sexton popped his head up from behind the bar, his face turning a sickly yellow as he saw the gigantic rough. Shuffling around the end of the counter, he reached the side of his newly-made acquaintance, busily whispering in his ear:

"Don't mind him, my dear sir! Pay no attention—don't cross the big brute! He's a mighty bad man, and—"

His movements attracted the attention of the man of bugs, whose long legs carried him swiftly to his side. A heavy hand clapped him on the shoulder.

"Git out, you! No buzzin' a gent while your uncle's shapin' his mouth fer to talk with him! Slump 'long to your gin-slingin', Fatty, 'less ye want fer to be made into soap-grease in a holy minnit! Hear me preach, honey!"

"So playful! just like a kitten!" murmured Gabriel, bowing rapidly as he grinned after a sickly fashion. "But mild as milk and the perfect gentleman, if I do say it! Mr. Metcalf—Mr. Romeo Bugg, one of our high-tonedest citizens!"

"How!" rumbled the giant, grabbing Fremont's hand with his left paw, and slapping it heavily with the other. "Durned ef I ever met a calf walkin' onto his hind laigs afore! Come an' take a bug with the ole man!"

The young man flushed a little at this play on his name as the comrades of the giant laughed noisily, but for reasons of his own, none of which were born of personal fear, however, he was desirous of avoiding trouble just then, and forcing a smile he made reply:

"I would be happy to do so, only Mr. Sexton was beforehand with you, and I can hardly drink two glasses at once."

"Mr. —, that fat cuss?" with a snort of scorn that drew a fresh series of bows from the painfully smiling Gabriel. "He ax a gent to drink? You little tub o' soap-grease! Take it back this minnit, or durned ef I don't make you swaller my hull museum at a single gulp—I will so!"

"Beg pardon—it was before you came in, my dear sir," wheezed Gabriel, with a deprecatory smile. "The gentleman was a stranger, and so I—"

"Thought you'd take him in, eh?" with a coarse laugh. "You was afeard he'd pull out o' your graveyard 'thout samplin' your p'izen, was ye? An' so you wanted to take away his senses with a dose, the better to go through his wardrobe?"

So coarsely insulting were his words and tone that Fremont Metcalf flushed angrily, almost forgetting his wish to keep in the background until his object in visiting The Grave was gained. His right fist clinched and the muscles of his arm grew tense as tempered steel. But Gabriel Sexton saw the dangerous impulse, and his hasty cough recalled the senses of the youth just in time to save the burly ruffian a surprise.

"So far Mr. Sexton has behaved like a gentleman," he said, the very calmness with which he spoke proving how difficult a task it was for him to control his temper. "When he acts otherwise toward me, it will be time to reprove or punish him. And, if you will allow me to say so, I can deal out that reproof or punishment without calling on you for help."

The bully stared at him half-savagely, half-doubtingly.

"Heap o' words, but durned ef I kin make head nor tale on 'em! Mebbe you'd putt the meanin' a leetle plainer?"

"Isn't this plain enough?" cried Gabriel, pushing a bottle and glasses toward them. "Sample it and see. My own private brand, gents, and I can recommend it highly. Please take a coffin-nail with me, Mr. Bugg—ha! ha!"

"No hoggin', then," growled the rascal, grabbing the decanter and pouring out a glass full of liquor. "Wait ontel your betters is sarved; leavin' is good enough fer the likes o' you, Fatty!"

Turning to Metcalf, he added:

"Bein' a tenderfoot here, 'course you don't know me, Bullcalf; but you will afore your ha'r gits gray! I'm Romeo Bugg, a mighty tough citizen from Spiderville! I'm bug by name an' bug by natur'! Big bug, king bug—ary sort o' bug ye kin rake an' scrape out o' your knowledge-box 'cept humbug! When you calls me that, you order your graveyard openin'."

While speaking, he filled the glass before Metcalf with liquor, then selecting a fat spider from the array upon his person, he coolly dropped it into the glass, laughing sneeringly as the young man started back with an ejaculation of disgust at the action.

"Nother thing you'll larn afore you die o' old age, critter! 'Tain't nothin' when ye gits used to it. Shet your eyes, ef ye like, an' swaller it 'thout tastin'. Then you'll be free o' the camp ferever more, amen!"

He grinned sardonically as Metcalf grasped the glass, but uttered a savage oath as the young man cast the liquor away.

"Is that a insult?" he growled, showing his teeth.

"It is common decency," coldly retorted the other.

Snapping the thread which held a tarantula-looking spider to his breast, Romeo Bugg dropped it into his own glass, pushing it along the counter to the young man, growling in deep-toned accents:

"Nother chaine, an' the last one, young feller! Swaller your med'cine, or croak!"

CHAPTER II.

OLD FORKED LIGHTNING, THE SOLITARY.

WITH a heavy, grating oath, Romeo Bugg whipped forth a revolver, and emphasized his commands by thrusting it almost into the paling face of the insulted young man. One elbow rested on the counter, and the big blue eyes glared savagely over the leveled tube, as the pointed hammer of the self-cocker slowly rose in readiness to sound the death-note.

A barely perceptible shiver ran over the frame of Fremont Metcalf, as he cast a swift glance around him, only his brilliant black eyes moving. That was sufficient to show him how little he had to hope for from the interference of those who viewed the outrage.

Several were shrinking silently away, their faces showing more thought for their own safety than any desire to prevent disgrace falling upon their town through the actions of this half-drunken bully. And those who remained within the saloon proper were grinning their approval.

It was this discovery that caused that shiver to creep over the frame of the young man. He saw that he was in the midst of enemies who would only jest and laugh as he fell; that, despite his oft-repeated resolve, he had run his head blindly into a trap baited with death!

"No givin' way at the knee-joints, pritty!" added Romeo Bugg, with a coarse laugh, detecting and misreading that shiver. "It's a bitter pill, but it must be tuck, as the bumper said to his mornin' bitters! Shet your eyes an' slop it down, critter! Ef my finger gits to jerkin' it'll land you in gelory, or t'other place—sure!"

It was plain to be seen that the big ruffian did not for a moment believe his victim would seriously resist his brutal will, yet his aim never varied, his finger ready to instantly trip the pointed hammer, his glowing gaze never once leaving the face of the one whom he had marked for his own.

And this thought was shared by his mates, as proven by their rude laughter and ruder jests.

"Any odds ye like that the kid takes his dose like a little man without ary a kick!" cried one of the roughts.

"Durned fool ef he don't!" was the blunt supplement from another. "Look at the King-bee! Ain't he a pictur'?"

"A chromeo on wheels—gilt-edged at that!"

"Good Lawd! ef they was only a *man* to the front o' him, 'stead o' that little runt, what fun they would be!"

There was a wide difference in the size and build of the two men thus confronted, but no good or unprejudiced judge would think of calling Fremont Metcalf a runt.

Some inches shorter, and two-score pounds lighter than the bug-adorned giant; but what there was of him "was all there," to use the vernacular.

Five feet, eight inches in altitude, the young man would weigh probably one hundred and sixty pounds, of healthy flesh, bone and muscle. His clear, healthy skin, his brilliant eyes, his easy movements, the playing muscles, all went to show that he had never abused himself by too much nor too little exercise. There was weight and muscle enough to meet even the huge bully, if back of it lay skill and nerve.

Yet even Gabriel Sexton, into whose good graces the young man had stepped without an effort, believed this nerve was woefully lacking as he anxiously peered into that paling face and listened to that slightly-shaking voice:

"It's a good joke, but rather strong for a sensitive stomach, don't you think?"

"Joke be durned! It's *business*—business chuck-up and sloppin' over, critter!" rumbled the hairy giant, showing his strong teeth in a grin that would have put a grizzly bear out of countenance. "You come in hyar 'mong common gents an' sling on too cussed much style, *you* do! To look, one'd think you owned the hull kentry an' the moon to boot, 'stead o' bein' a tenderfoot which hain't got acclimated yit, nur even paid your footin' to the chief o' Canaan—which is me, Mister Romeo Bugg, Esquire—an'-so-foth!"

Fremont Metcalf, turning a shade paler, cast a swift look over the spectators. Was it fancy, did he recognize deadly enemies among the foremost? Was this brutal outrage but a shallow excuse to draw him into a quarrel where his death might be readily accomplished?

Right or wrong, he believed this, and mentally cursed himself for risking his one dear hope. And yet, how could he have avoided the encounter without also casting aside that hope?

His black eyes came back from that brief exploring excursion, and met the glowing blue orbs which stared at him over the polished tube of death. His voice was low and a trifle unsteady as he spoke:

"I am sorry if I have unwittingly broken any rules or regulations. As you say, I am a stranger in your town, and for that reason, you should not bear so hard on me. You have had your joke at my expense, and I am ready to laugh at it with you. Can I say any more?"

"You kin do more, critter. You kin jump outside o' that spider cocktail in a hurry. Swaller it or croak!" growled the big bully, showing no signs of relenting.

Just the contrary. The quiet, almost meek speech of the young man served to increase his domineering spirit, and he even lowered his burning gaze, seeming to debate whether or no he should not add the mate to the hairy spider in the glass.

"Ten to one the kid takes his dose like a baby!" cried one of the roughts.

"Course he will, sense he cain't run fer it," sniffed another worthy, nose high in air.

Only for an instant did the gaze of the giant waver. Then his pistol was thrust still nearer the white face of the young man, and his voice grew still harsher as he uttered:

"Time's up an' no more foolishin', critter! It's Romeo Bugg you hear preachin' now, an' what he says goes without copperin'. Down the dose—surround the animile—swaller the museum—or croak!"

There was no longer anything like a joke in his voice or looks. Even a stranger to his brutal, reckless disposition could not doubt but that he would be as good as his word—that he would shoot, and shoot to kill, unless his disgusting commands were literally complied with.

And Fremont Metcalf seemed to realize this, for a sickly smile crept over his pale countenance as he slowly extended his right hand and grasped the glass, casting one shivering glance at the hairy spider, now curled up into a ball as though stupefied by the fumes of the strong liquor. A rude chorus burst from the gang of roughts as they witnessed this motion, and even those among the spectators who would, under similar circumstances, have feared to act differently, felt more contempt than pity for the stranger who so meekly submitted to such an outrage.

"Drink, or go flickerin' up the golden sta'rs, critter!"

"If you *will* have it—your excellent health, Mr. Bugg!"

Sharp and clear came the last words, without any trembling or fear in the tones. Swift as thought Fremont Metcalf brushed the revolver aside with a sweep of his left hand, at the same instant hurling spider, liquor and glassful into the face of the giant!

The heavy glass was shattered into a score of pieces, and dropping his weapon with a choking shout, the bully reeled back a few paces, dropping heavily to the floor.

Lithe as a panther, Fremont Metcalf leaped back, each hand filling with a revolver the muzzles of which covered the astounded roughts as his voice rung out sharp and menacingly:

"Crowd me at your own peril, you dogs! The baby comes out in man's clothing now, and gives not another inch!"

He looked twice as big to them now. And as they noted how vividly his eyes glittered—how steadily he held his weapons—how boldly he faced them—the gang involuntarily fell back, giving him more room.

And honest Gabriel Sexton, whose heart was in the right place, however much he might have been lacking in courage, hurriedly squatted beneath his bar, covering his fat lips with both hands to smother the cheer of joy which rose in his throat and almost choked him.

Romeo Bugg lay in a sprawling heap on the sanded floor, bleeding profusely from the cuts inflicted by the broken tumbler, growling, snarling in a choking voice, almost deprived of his senses by that terrible blow. His body quivered, his brawny hands opened and shut, working like the paws of a sorely wounded bear; but for the moment he was helpless.

A single glance Fremont Metcalf cast at him, then his eyes turned toward the doorway. He knew that now was his time to escape, if he hoped to avoid further trouble. He knew that it was his duty to do so, remembering the all-important purpose which had brought him to the mining-town; but he could not bring himself to take the rightful step.

"I have eaten enough dirt!" he mentally exclaimed, his white teeth setting firmly, a dogged light glowing in his dark eyes. "Until to-night, I never showed the white feather, even in seeming, nor will I ever again. If worst comes of it, Dinorah must act for both. I'll see the circus out right here!"

Scarcely had this stubborn resolve flashed across his excited brain, when a hoarse cry escaped the blood-covered lips of the fallen giant. A ray of truth seemed to strike him and penetrate the sore confusion which filled his brain.

"Kill the critter! Don't let him git off! Cut him to chicken-feed, you bulldogs!" he snarled, with difficulty scrambling to his feet, brushing the blood from his eyes and glaring wildly around him while his right hand sought a weapon.

Clear and sternly came from his antagonist's lips:

"Hands off, you overgrown brute! Your life is mine, if I choose to take it—and take it I will, if you try to crowd me further!"

Suffocating with rage, the giant whirled in the direction of that commanding voice, his sinewy fingers closing on the haft of his knife in preference to a pistol-butt, for he was not too far gone to realize how uncertain his aim must be.

"I'll cut your heart out, critter!" he snarled, steadying his shaking form and again clearing his eyes.

Fremont Metcalf had him covered, holding his life wholly at his disposal; but he did not fire, though fully justified in so doing. He saw

the ominous looks of the gang. He heard their low mutterings, and knew that the first shot would bring them at his throat, ten to one. Yet he did not give an inch, and there was no trace of fear in his tones as he cried:

"You are safe as you stand, Romeo Bugg; but a single step carries you over the dead line. Take warning in time!"

Reckless as he was, the giant hesitated before taking that step. Not because he thought of abandoning his fell purpose, but with the passage of each moment his eyesight was improving, his strength returning to his limbs.

"Watch him, lads!" he growled, stanching the fast flowing blood, still gripping his long and ugly weapon. "Don't let him gi' me the slip while I can't see! Watch him—jump him in a heap, you dirty whelps! Member what we come fer!"

Fremont Metcalf gave a barely perceptible start as he caught this husky sentence, for it told him his worst suspicions were only too well founded—that his object in visiting Canaan and The Grave were known to his enemies.

"Let the 'dirty whelps' try it on, if they want a holy pic-nic!" he cried, sharply, both revolvers covering the gang as a movement among them showed an inclination to obey the orders of their chief. "Some who start will stop half-way, and I'll make it mighty interesting for the rest!"

Imperfect though his eyesight was, Romeo Bugg could see plain enough to detect the cowering of his bullies before those menacing tubes, and a howling curse parted his lips.

"Git, you cowards! I'll do the work my own self!"

At that instant a wild, weird looking figure entered the saloon and glided swiftly between the antagonists, confronting the maddened giant, one hand waving him back as a deep-toned voice uttered the words:

"Go a leetle slow, sonny! Don't let your angry madness git on top o' your ca'mness. But ef you must try your han' at fancy carvin', s'pose you begin with the ole man?"

The bleeding rough was gathering his strength and crouching for the leap which even he was collected enough to know could end only in death to one or both, but as that figure intervened and that mocking tone saluted his ears, he recoiled, with a low cry that contained both fear and superstition.

Yet it was only an old and seemingly frail man who confronted him; one whom the weight of his single hand ought to crush or sweep aside. But not only did Romeo Bugg recoil and show something very like affright; his mates in evil hastily fell back, glancing over their shoulders as though to make sure the way was clear for precipitate flight!

The once tall, athletic frame was slightly bowed at the shoulders, though the snowy-crowned head was held proudly erect and the jetty eyes flashed with all the fires of youth. In that, and in the masses of white hair which covered his head and face, leaving only his curved nose, his eyes and a narrow line of forehead visible, alone was perceptible the decay of old age. His movements were quick and free; his voice was clear and strong.

His form was covered with rags and tatters, eked out here and there by patches of skin and fur, the tags and ends fluttering with every motion, with each gust of wind. To the outward eye, he bore no weapons, though a score of pistols might easily have been hidden among the rags.

"Old Forked-Lightning," muttered Romeo Bugg, as he shrunk back, unconsciously licking the blood which trickled over his yellow beard.

"Jes' so, sonny," was the placid reply. "Ole Forked-Lightnin', come out o' the clouds fer to look at the one big an' on'y 'riginal walkin' museum o' bugs an' spiders an' ginerals cussedness an' sin! Ole Forked-Lightnin', who leaves his storm-dwellin' fer to whisper in your ear—skin out o' this wilderness while the law 'lows ye, sonny! Slink off an' hide your evil head 'mong the creepin' an' crawlin' critters you love to consort with, fer the han' o' outraged justice is even now twistin' the rope an' greasin' the slip-noose that is to forever choke off your plagu'-spreadin' wind!"

There was a strange mixture of lofty warning and whimsical mockery in both words and tone that stung the huge brute sharper than the cut of a whiplash. His eyes flashed redly, his teeth showed themselves, and his hand gripped his knife-haft more fiercely.

Old Forked-Lightning saw this, and read his thoughts aright, but instead of recoiling or arming himself, he tossed back the flossy masses of snow-white hair, laughing in the rage-contorted face of the giant as he slowly shook one forefinger before his eyes.

"You want to do it, sonny, but you don't dast! Fer all your blowin' an' bluster, you're a cowardly cur that kin on'y snarl an' snap at the heels of a man when his back's turned. Let him show his face, an' away you go with your tail!"

Driven to madness, the giant leaped forward, his glittering weapon uplifted to descend in a sweeping cut. He struck—but the bright steel never found its intended sheath of living flesh.

Never an atom flinched the old man, but his right hand went up and out, closing in a mighty grip around the wrist of the armed hand, checking its descent with a marvelous power!

For a brief space he held the hand of the as-sounded ruffian thus, laughing in his face. Then his eyes flashed with a reddish light, a swift tremor seemed to run along his rag-clad arm, and the ugly weapon was sent whirling from the hand of its owner, to stick in the ceiling above. Another tremor, and a howl of angry pain burst from the lips of the giant as he writhed and twisted rapidly in the vain effort to free his wrenched arm from that terrible grasp.

"Didn't I say it was a mongrel cur in the hide of a bull-dog?" laughed the strange old man, flinging the ruffian from him with such force that he reeled and tottered, only saved from falling by striking the rest of the gang.

Without a second glance toward the fellow whom he handled so unceremoniously, Old Forked-Lightning turned upon Fremont Metcalf, who was watching him with feelings of mingled wonder and admiration. His face was hard and stern, his voice containing a rebuke even sharper than his words as he spoke:

"And you, young man—is this the place for a gentleman? Are these the sports suitable for a man of honor? For shame! You, the sole companion—the guardian of innocence and truth—for shame, sir!"

Fremont Metcalf, taken aback by this sharp and unexpected address, flushed hotly. Yet he could not feel anger against one who had so nobly come to his rescue when all others held aloof. He felt a wish to clear himself, but he durst not risk it then and there.

"You are here, drinking, carousing, brawling with brutes who disgrace the shape of mankind, while she—"

If wholly a brute, as he had that evening proved himself, Romeo Bugg was not a coward when confronted with common mortals. And even now, though he, in common with many others, held the strange being who bore the stranger *sobriquet* in superstitious awe, the ignominious manner in which he had been handled and held up to shame, was sufficient to urge him to revenge.

The back of the old man was turned toward him. Fremont Metcalf was standing with downcast eyes, listening to that sharp rebuke.

But Gabriel Sexton was on the alert, and as he saw the giant draw his revolver and cock it, he uttered a wheezing cry.

Swift as thought Old Forked-Lightning wheeled and confronted his enemy, his arms folded across his bosom.

Distrusting his powers of sighting, thanks to that deftly shattered glass, Romeo Bugg feared to use his weapon as a self-cocker. Instead, he lifted the hammer, dropping the barrel across his left arm as it bowed before him, thus forming a comparatively steady rest for the weapon. And thus he stood when Old Forked-Lightning turned upon him with a sharp, metallic laugh, filled with a mocking scorn.

"Try it, if you dare, dog!" he uttered, facing the dark tube without a shade of fear or shrinking.

It seemed a frightful risk to run. Indeed, to any other mortal being that defiance would have proven a death-warrant. But that old superstition again assailed the giant, and made his hands tremble like one with the ague.

"You dare not shoot, you bullying dog!" repeated Old Forked-Lightning, his right hand slowly extending as he moved toward the gang. "It is a man who tells you so. Go! leave this while you are permitted. I give you ten seconds."

The grace was more than sufficient. Like a flock of sorely terrified sheep, the members of the gang turned and made a break for the door. Romeo Bugg hesitated for a little, but as that tall, white crowned shape steadily advanced, he, too, turned and fled, staggeringly, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Amazed, Fremont Metcalf watched this strange scene, his pistol ready for use when the worst should come to the worst. He expected to see Bugg turn to send a shot through the open doorway from the darkness without, but in this he was agreeably disappointed. Thoroughly cowed, feeling faint from the loss of blood, the giant thought only of escaping from the reach of those magnetic eyes.

Old Forked-Lightning seemed to have no thought or fear of an afterclap, for no sooner had the worsted giant left the saloon, than he turned to complete his lecture to Metcalf.

"Once more I ask you, Fremont Metcalf, is this the place for an honest man—least of all, one with your responsibilities? For shame, sir! Spending the golden hours of youth in riotous debauchery among low-minded ruffians! Brawling like wild beasts! Risking the life that should be so precious to yourself, even as it is precious to one whose name must not be uttered here, even in a whisper!"

Embarrassed, the youth shifted uneasily. He knew that he did not deserve such a proof, but he durst not resent it or avow his real reasons for calling at The Grave. And fortunately for

his peace of mind, just then there came an interruption.

No sooner had Romeo Bugg and his evil gang crossed the threshold, than Gabriel Sexton hastened to leave his refuge and close the door, shutting off all view from the street. And returning, it was his fat hand that cordially clapped Old Forked-Lightning on the shoulder as he wheezed forth:

"You done yourself and all of us mighty proud, uncler! Come and celebrate a little with me, do!"

"Don't keer ef I do," promptly muttered the old man, his back bowing, his inspired look vanishing as he mechanically brushed one hand across his bearded lips.

It was a sudden transition, and for the life of him Fremont Metcalf could not entirely conceal the smile which came to his lips as he saw how eagerly the invitation was accepted by one who so recently preached abstinence and sobriety.

CHAPTER III.

FACT AND FANCY, DEFTLY MINGLED.

OLD FORKED LIGHTNING turned upon Fremont Metcalf and surprised that amused smile before the young man could conceal it. A warm flush instantly came into such portions of his face as were not hidden by the mass of flossy white hair; the brilliant eyes seemed to grow dim as they abruptly fell; the stoop in his shoulders grew more pronounced; the hand that lay on the counter—the hand that had humiliated the drunken giant with such seeming ease—quivered as with palsy. But it was only for a fleeting instant. Then the old man tossed back the hair which floated over his eyes, facing the youth proudly, almost defiantly, as he spoke:

"You laugh—at what? At the weakness of the flesh? The poor infirmities of poorer mankind? Because a wretch trips and falls, is he never to warn a fellow-being of the same cunning trap for the unwary? Is he to wallow in the mire and say naught when a warning cry from his soiled lips might save a soul from utter damnation?"

Fremont Metcalf was not smiling now. Taken utterly by surprise, he shrunk a little, covered with confusion, and not entirely without shame at having his secret thoughts read so easily and reproved so sharply.

"Believe me, I did not mean to—"

"Put it in so many plain words, but for all that, your thoughts were as I have given them," coldly interposed the strange being. "You were laughing at the idea of my warning you to avoid all such sink-holes of iniquity, and then the next instant leaping at the offer of a free glass of whisky. Why should you? If no man had ever felt or witnessed the effects of a rattlesnake's bite, how many would flee from its death-warning rattle?"

"Now quit!" hastily puffed Gabriel Sexton, with a shudder of aversion as he placed decanter and glasses on the bar. "The mention o' creepin' critters makes me think of that tuggy procession on two legs till I can't rest! Sample that, old lad! Never a sting in it, though you corral a barrellful!"

The flush deepened on his face, and Old Forked-Lightning visibly hesitated, glancing swiftly from the liquor to the door and back again. It was clear that he was ashamed of his weakness, that he longed to resist temptation, but without the moral strength to do so successfully.

Only one who was watching him closely would have noticed this, for the next instant his trembling fingers closed around the neck of the decanter, and poured his glass even full of the amber-bued liquid.

"After you, my dear sir," smiled Gabriel, pushing the decanter along to the young man. "Fill up, and I'll give you a little sentiment—ahem!"

Fremont tipped a small quantity of liquor into his glass. Gabriel proved his faith in his own goods by pouring out a bumper, holding it critically between his little eyes and the light as he moistened his lips to pronounce his toast; but he was too deliberate, and, in the vulgate, "got left."

Sharply, almost harshly, rung out the voice of Old Forked-Lightning:

"May the foul fiend reserve a hot corner for all who distill, sell or swill the vile poison! Any milder punishment would be too good for the least guilty of them all!"

Bitter as was his sentiment, the old man swallowed the dose with the air of one who rather loved his enemies, but Gabriel made a wry face, and even ventured to mutter:

"Tain't fair to make a gent drink to his own eternal—same to you and many of 'em!" he spluttered hastily as the strange being turned toward him with a dark frown.

In his half-superstitious dread of The Solitary, Gabriel came near committing suicide. The fiery liquor went "down his Sunday throat," and coughing, choking, gasping, the fat man fell behind his counter in agony.

Not even the ghost of a smile softened that hard countenance, and Old Forked-Lightning turned to Fremont Metcalf, to finish his temperance lecture.

"Not as I do, but as I advise, young man, and you will be happy. Shun evil company. Avoid the wine-glass as you would a coiled rattlesnake. Steer clear of saloons and those who hover around the vile sinks of iniquity in search of innocents to rob and murder. Turn back while you may—for there is a certain point along the trail you are now treading which, once passed, makes a retreat forever impossible! With you it is not yet too late. Be warned, and forget it not, for one speaks who only too well understands the perils which lie before you—perils worse than death, for they damn your soul, as well as annihilate your body!"

He paused, as though for breath, and Fremont Metcalf made out to reply:

"I owe you thanks, both for your well-meant advice—"

"Which you hain't the least idee o' follerin', fer you're ready to take your davy it ain't needed in your case," bluntly interposed the old man, with a change of tone and manner as abrupt as it was complete. "You ain't no drunkard. You ain't no gambler. You on'y take a fri'ndly glass now an' then; you on'y finger the devil's papers 'casionally fer fun. Don't I know it all? Didn't I go through the same mill when I was a many year younger an' foolisher'n I be now?"

"Like you, young feller, I played with fire an' never feared gittin' my fingers scorched. It was the fashion, an' I knowed I could quit it all an' turn back whenever I felt the notion. So I said then, when whiter heads talked to me. So I could 'a' tuck oath; but look at me now! A broken-down critter without home or friends! A slave to the vile poison that robbed me of all—that pulled me down to the lowest depths of sin and degradation—that made me a bitter curse to myself and all who held me dear!"

He turned abruptly to the bar and poured out another full glass, swallowing it at a single gulp. He turned to the startled youth, laughing hardly, bitterly.

"You see! The devil tempted and conquered me, even while I was trying to show you his danger. Once more I tell you, do as I say, not as I set the example. Go back to the one who is waiting and watching for your coming. Shake the dust of this evil place from your feet forever. Linger, and you will find a grave ready dug for you by brutes who are strangers to the very name of mercy."

Fremont Metcalf laughed slightly, then said: "When my work is done, my object accomplished, I will go. What I have seen of Canaan and its inhabitants has not made me deeply in love with it. There will be few tears shed when I turn my back upon it for good and all."

"Tears will be shed if you dally—bitter tears from fair and innocent eyes!" was the grave response. "You are a marked man already. Your death is sworn. Romeo Bugg and his gang are down on you, and the next time they will strike without warning. In flight alone lies your safety."

"They have more cause to hate you than me. I only knocked down one; you covered them all with shame."

"They know me," with a short, dry laugh. "They care not to meddle with lightning. But you—" and he bent forward until his lips were close to the ears of the youth, whispering guardedly: "You have more than yourself to live for. If you lose your life in this sink of iniquity, what fate awaits her? Reflect, and act in time."

Without pausing for a reply, the strange old man turned on his heel and strode rapidly out of the saloon.

Fremont Metcalf was not sorry. Though he felt grateful to the veteran for the service he had rendered him, knowing as he did that only for him and the strange influence he possessed over the gang of roughs, bloodshed if not death must surely have followed, his departure was very welcome. So long as he remained, general attention was drawn toward them by the peculiar words and actions of the strange being; and the young man knew that this attention would endanger, if it did not entirely frustrate, his object in visiting The Grave.

Gabriel Sexton seemed almost as much relieved by the withdrawal of Old Forked-Lightning, drawing a long breath of pleasure and mopping the drops from his shining temples as he leaned confidentially across the bar and huskily whispered:

"A remarkable man, my dear sir! A most re-mark-a-ble man, sir! But—just a l-e-e-tle cracked up here, if I may be allowed the expression. Looks at things through a crooked glass as one might put it. But means well, that I'll admit."

A covert glance around showed Metcalf that he was no longer the center of attraction. The saloon proper was empty with the exception of the barkeeper, Gabriel Sexton and himself. The gaming tables proved greater attractions, now that the prospect of bloodshed and death had vanished.

With his mind thus placed at ease, and knowing that he must wait for the coming of one whom he had traveled many miles to question, Fremont Metcalf rather welcomed the advances

of the talkative ex-undertaker. By listening to him, he could wait without arousing either curiosity or suspicion.

"A remarkable man, truly, else he could never have pulled me through that ugly scrape with such ease. Who and what is he? I am curious to learn more about him."

"He's a mystery and an enigma; that's what he is," with a series of quick nods. "He ain't the devil, for he works good instead of evil; but you couldn't convince fellows like Romeo Bugg and his gang of that! They hate him as the Old Boy is said to hate holy water! Fear him, too—and so do I!"

Fremont laughed softly at this sudden admission, but it was a very sickly grin with which Gabriel joined in.

"Why should you fear him, if he only fights evil? Because he preaches against drink and gaming?"

Sexton shook his head, a cunning twinkle in his eyes.

"Not that. Though he can surround more whisky without showing the effects than any man I ever met, I'd willingly fill him full each evening just to have him rattle off one of his sermons. Because why? the more you abuse a man for drinking, the thirstier he'll fancy himself! Tell a man he can't have whisky, and he'll break his neck but what he'll prove you a liar. Make a law against it, and you'll double the consumption of whisky. Those who drank before will bog it down, while those who never touched it when at perfect liberty, will indulge ten times as often, just because they fancy the law deprives them of a portion of their liberties! Human nature, my dear sir—human nature, all over!"

"But who is he? What is his name? For, of course, he has another title than Old Forked-Lightning?"

"If he has, he don't wear it on his sleeve. Old Forked-Lightning, or sometimes The Solitary; take your choice. Who is he? Nobody knows. Where did he come from? Up-country, somewhere, I've heard. Lived there or thereabouts for ages, they say—a genuine relic of by-gone days!"

"Then no one knows anything definite about him?"

"They know too much!" with a nod so sharp and hasty that it made the joints of his fat neck crack. "And unless they lie like all git out! he totes a charmed life around with him. Bullets flatten out and bounce back when he's shot at. Try to stick him with a knife, and the best of steel snaps in bits like a rotten icicle. Get him in a tight corner, where any ordinary man would die, to a moral certainty, and he'll vanish—melt—evaporate—and not half try!"

"Oh, come, now!" smiled Metcalf.

"Mind you, I don't swear to it," soberly whispered honest Gabriel, with a nervous glance around him. "I only repeat the tales told by others. But they'll take oath to its truth. And—blessed if I wouldn't—almost!"

It was ridiculous, of course, and Fremont Metcalf smiled at the fat man for his foolish credulity; but at the same time he felt a peculiar thrill as he recalled what he had witnessed so short a time before. If Old Forked-Lightning was but an ordinary mortal, what was the secret of his wonderful influence over those depraved wretches? Why did not Romeo Bugg send a bullet through his heart when so boldly faced with unarmed hands? That his will was good enough, no one who saw the event could doubt. Even with his injured eyesight, the big bully could not have missed his mark at such short range. Then why was it?

"Because he is a man without fear, with extraordinary will power and nerve!" he muttered, more to himself than to the dumpy saloon-keeper.

"In some things, true enough," was the quick reply. "But in others—well, you saw him. He couldn't draw back when I whispered whisky in his ear, though he was just then preaching temperance to you, red-hot!"

Gabriel chuckled after a wheezy, gasping fashion, little suspecting how closely akin to disgust were the sentiments with which he inspired the young man. In his estimation, the successful temptation was a rare stroke of wit.

"But that's the only point on which he's weak and I've known him now for more'n a year. When he first struck Canaan, he was set down by all as a lunatic. There were more sinners than saints in the camp, then, and a certain class thought it a holy picnic when the old gent came to town. They counted on having heaps of fun—and fun they had, too—bushels of it!"

"It was a Sunday that they opened up their batteries on the old gent. Not that they meant anything worse than a little fun and horse-play at first; but they burnt their fingers bad! It wasn't only a circus, but a hull menagerie that they found they'd picked up."

"It started with the old dance game, you know. They got the old gent inside a ring, and set him to dancing for his life. He showed mighty soople joints, too, he did, and they was having oceans of fun when they began shooting at his heels; not to hit, you understand: just to 'flee his joints a bit. But I reckon he thought they meant business, and though nobody had

seen anything of guns about him, there they were in a hurry! And talk! Well, I should re-mark! It was a hull Fourth of July with general training day thrown in as a side show! Those who looked on without an interest in the show, swore that a stream of fire poured out of each finger the old gent had on his two hands! Fire and lead! And in two seconds thar was more sick heels and invalid toes hopping around that stamping grounds than a doctor could do up in a week! They didn't belong to the old gent, neither!"

"That show lu'sted up in a holy minnit, I tell you! And then the old gent read 'em a lecture, holding 'em under his guns until he'd got clean through. Told 'em to call again whenever they wanted some more fun. Told 'em to knock and they should be answered so quick it'd make their heads swim!"

"Served the unmanly brutes right! They let him alone after that, I warrant!"

"Not exactly, they didn't. It took a more searching dose than that to cure 'em," was the chuckling reply. "The next morning I reckon they was a dozen bad men hobbling around on crutches, bunting for the old gent. They didn't find him right then, but when they got a little better on foot, he struck the camp again. And then the band began to play, loud! By ones and twos and in bunches they tackled him, and—"

"Wasn't there any men in town to see fair play?" indignantly cried Metcalf, his dark eyes glowing. "Were there none to side with the poor old fellow and aid him?"

"He didn't need 'em, stranger," chuckled Gabriel, shaking all over, like a fantastic mold of jelly dressed in clothes. "Come with me tomorrow, and I'll let you count 'em yourself!"

"Count what?"

"The graves. I trimmed them up the best I could, but the old gent furnished the corpses, free of charge."

Fremont shivered slightly at the matter-of-fact tone. A stranger to the peculiar life which reigns in the "wild and woolly West" and particularly in young mining-towns of a few years since, all this was new and unpleasant to him.

"And after that—the circus, as you call it?" he uttered hastily, to change the subject in part.

"Well, it was a little smoother sailing for the old gent, though every little while some bad man would try to take him into camp for a change. Just as often the old gent would come out top of the heap, and he showed such quickness to jump at an invitation to have some fun, and was so sure of his work, that the boys got to speaking of him as Forked-Lightning. Until then he traveled without a name, so far as anybody but his own self knew; after that, he adopted the title, and has shown under it ever since."

"Surely he made some friends among so many enemies? The whole town was not evil?"

"He made one, anyhow."

"Only one?"

"That was enough, stranger," was the earnest reply. "That was a whole army, with a brass band and rifle-battery thrown in to make weight! That friend was Chispa Charley, the Golden Nugget Sport, as some call him; the Man With a Record, as others know him better."

"Another of your odd characters?" queried Metcalf, interested and amused by the grave, respectful manner in which the worthy saloon-keeper spoke.

"A gentleman from the ground up, if he is a gambler," was the earnest response. "Everybody don't like him; he's got his enemies, of course, since he's a man that won't be rid over rough-shod by king nor kaiser, peer nor peasant—figgeratively speaking, you know. Which is to say that Chispa Charley can be a gentleman with gents, or a tiger with wild beasts, as the 'casion comes to the top."

"A Spaniard, from his name, I judge?"

"Not any Greaser 'bout Chispa, stranger—not much! He's clean white and forty carats fine, sure's you're a foot high!"

"And he took the part of the old man?"

"I'll tell you. He wasn't here when the first row come off, though he struck camp shortly afterward, did Charley. Come with a record, too, from the lower country. But let that go for this once. It's enough to show what he did for the old gent."

"The old gent had pulled out, nobody knew where to, right after his jubilee with the tough cases which went for him so crazy for wool, but all the camp was talking it over when Chispa dropped in. He didn't say much—he always acts more than he talks—but I reckon he took it all in and sifted out what was worth keeping. Anyway, when the next row come off and he heard of it—he was down at Tinker's Dam, I believe—he came back red-hot. He spoke his little piece to the boys, and then set off to hunt the old gent up."

"Where he found him, or what he learned, nobody ever knew outside of the couple themselves; but it made Chispa Charley the best friend of the old gent's. He took pains to go the rounds and gently hint to all who held any sort o' grudge against the old man, that they'd

better bottle it up and sink the bottle to the bottom of the deepest shaft they could find, then fill the hole up. If they didn't—if they were so mad they couldn't hold it in, but had to spit it out—he gently advised them to pick out a claim and stake it for their private use as a sleeping-place, for if they got away from Old Forked-Lightning, he was bound to chip in on a freeze-out."

"You mean, to take up the quarrel?" asked Fremont, a little puzzled by the metaphor.

"Ex-actly! And they knew Chispa was a mighty bad man when he turned himself loose. And so it come to pass that Old Forked-Lightning, what with his own doings and the backing of Chispa Charley, pretty well got the freedom of the city. Either one would be a mighty tough bite for a gang to git away with, but when it come to a second course—and that course Chispa Charley!—no I thank you—not any in mine!"

"Yet that big rascal tried to kill him!"

"Because he was crazy-mad. You knocked what little sense he ever had, west-end-and-crooked with my glass. You saw how his heels slunk off! You saw how the old gent paralyzed even Romeo, when he faced him? Only for Chispa Charley, I do reckon the Bugg would have tried a shot then, he was so hot. But he thought of the after-clap, and didn't."

"I had him covered, and though I would hate to have the blood of such a cur on my hands, I meant to drill him through if he tried to pull trigger," quietly but sternly said Fremont.

"Pity you didn't," whispered Gabriel, lowering his voice and casting a shy glance around them. "You'll have to do it yet, without you leave town before you're a day older. Romeo Bugg don't forget so easy, and he'll go to get hunk with you, sure's you're a foot high! Watch your chance, and shoot on sight. We'll stand by you, if you lay the big brute out."

The advice was friendly and prudent, but Metcalf shivered a little as he listened. Truly, he was not made for such a life as this!

"It's you or him," added Gabriel, noting that quiver, but being sharp enough to attribute it to the right cause. "He won't make a sign or give a note of warning before he strikes at your life. Even now he may be laying—"

The door opened and a rough clad man entered the saloon. Startled by the sound, both Metcalf and Sexton turned around, just as something whizzed between their heads, so close to both that they distinctly felt its wind.

CHAPTER IV.

NEW STYLE IN VISITING CARDS.

At the first glance Fremont Metcalf recognized in the man who entered the saloon one of the gang which had followed the lead of Romeo Bugg; and his natural suspicion was that the fellow had returned to avenge the downfall of his chief. Doubly sure was he when the rough made that swift motion with his right hand, and ducking slightly, the young man gripped a revolver, ready to defend himself.

He felt the wind created by the swift passage of the missile between himself and Gabriel Sexton; he heard it coming in contact with something hard behind the counter, followed by a peculiar fluttering sound; but as the rough made no further move that could be interpreted as offensive, Fremont hesitated to draw his weapon.

"Clubs is trumps, or I never l'arned to read my hymn-book right!" cried the stranger, his voice hoarse, husky, uncertain.

A hot flush swept over the face of the young man, as rapidly receding, leaving him pale as a dead man. He drew in a short, gasping breath as he turned his head and glanced toward the bar.

The missile, as such, had been a very harmless one; nothing more nor less than a greasy, well-thumbed deck of playing cards. Flying straight and compact until they struck against one of the uprights which divided the mirrors behind the bar, all save one card had fluttered to the shelf beneath in a variegated heap. That exception—the five-spot of clubs—still clung to the wooden support, as though glued there.

Only the five-spot of clubs, the corners rounded from long and steady use, stained and soiled, dingy and rank, smelling of tobacco and whisky, with a reddish spot near the center which might be ambeer, or might be blood. Only a ragged, dirty, half-drunken digger, out on a "bum."

Little enough, one would think, to so strangely affect the man who had shown such steady nerve in the very face of death.

"Hellow, Gabe, you little fat rascal! how does the world use ya, anyhow?" added the newcomer, with affected geniality as he lurched forward with outstretching paw. "Putt it thar, ole sinner—shake for ole times—hey?"

With owlish gravity Gabriel clasped his own hands together, shaking them up and down. The bumper-looking fellow stared at him for a moment in open-mouthed doubt, then clapped both dingy paws sharply against his own thighs, chuckling:

"Good, or I'm a howlin' liar right from the head o' the crick! Every dog shake his own

paw, hey? Got to git up afore he goes to bed, a critter must, to git ahead o' Jolly Gabe, you bet!"

Another chuckling laugh, suddenly cut short by a gravity that was almost ludicrous. Then, walking on tiptoe, the rough advanced to the bar, leaning over it, making a tunnel of his grimy paws, through which he hoarsely whispered:

"Say, Gabe, can't you set 'em up jest once?"

"Slate's bu'sted," was the laconic response.

The fellow drew back with a ludicrous assumption of injured dignity, saying haughtily:

"Who whispered slate? Who axed fer a hang-'em-up? Clubs is trumps—len' me a drink onto the ole hymn-book, fer luck! It's big enough s'curity fer a hull bar'l, fer long's you tote them keerds you cain't never go broke—no, sir! Boun' to win every time you-squeeze your weasel the way it tells ye. Wrap her up in silk an' sating, Gabe. Lay it away in cedar chips an' seegyar stumps ontel the ole man comes back a-flickerin' to the rescow of his darlin'—jes' one coffin-nail onto it, ole pard?"

With gingerly touch, Gabriel was collecting the scattered deck, last of all removing the five-spot of clubs from the post to which it clung by means of a sharpened tack. Pushing the dingy heap across the counter, he said tersely:

"Now you git!"

"But I hain't got the p'izen, ole mate," whined the other.

"Show the color, first, Jay. You know the law."

"Dead-bu'sted, an' the snakes beginnin' to crawl up my ole boot-laijs! Jest a swaller fer to squinch 'em, Gabe!"

During all this, Fremont Metcalf was struggling to bring his emotions under control. Although he had come to The Grave—had traveled hundreds of miles for the express purpose of meeting one who was to exhibit the five-spot of clubs—now that it was shown, his brain seemed in a whirl, his heart throbbing so violently that he could scarcely breathe.

The mist slowly cleared away, and just as the fellow was picking up his cards with a reproachful air, he stepped forward, dropping a coin upon the bar as he said:

"A drop of brandy, please. Will you join me, sir?" he added, bowing to the ragged fellow, as though just becoming aware of his presence.

"Will I? Will a tappin'-snorkle bite ef you stick your big toe into his mouth? Won't I, ruther!" snuffled the down-at-the-beel digger, grasping the young man's hand and wringing it agitatedly.

"Come, Jay, don't slobber," sharply uttered Gabriel, plainly disgusted at the idea of a gentleman whom he had honored with his smiles, having aught to do with such a disreputable-looking character.

"Fatty, hold your hush when gents is 'changin' compliments together," haughtily uttered the bumper, his nose high in the air. "Set out your p'izen—an' wipe your fingers good afore you tetch the glasses!"

The ex-undertaker turned red and his little eyes almost popped from their sockets at this insolent speech. But the digger never gave him a second glance, turning to Fremont Metcalf, still holding his hand in an ardent pressure.

"It's noble an' high-toned of ye to put it that way, stranger—deed it is, now! Fer, don't I know? Didn't I see your noble years a-flickerin' as they tuck in my humble words a bit ago? It ain't that you're dry or thusty, but 'ca'se you wanted to save a pore down-onto-his-luck critter from hev'in' his two boots filled chuck-up-an' runnin'-over with a howlin' menadgery! An' so I take it, stranger—take it as a sacred debt o' honor, to be paid back with interest out o' the very fu'st color I raise—'deed I do, now!"

"Never mention it, my dear sir."

"But I must—I cain't help it! Ef I was to swaller the p'izen an' never note it down fer a pay-it-back-ag'in, it'd be the death of youn truly, fer very shame—'deed it would! 'Tain't a beggar nur yit a bumper which you're rescowin' so high-toned, stranger; not any! A pore cuss in 'duced sarcumstances, but a gentleman fer all that, who never was knowed to go to sleep onto a debt like this. Ef you'll kindly give me your name an' boardin' place, so I'll know who to ring up—thankee, double over!"

Now fully recovered from his surprise and agitation, Fremont drew a notebook from an inner pocket, and produced a card from its depths. His black eyes were keenly scrutinizing the dirty face of the bumper as he extended the card, and a peculiar glow filled them as the fellow dexterously palmed the dingy piece of pasteboard.

Gabriel Sexton was leaning over the counter, his little eyes curiously s'aring, but he was unable to catch more than a glimpse of the card. Had he caught a fair view of its face, he might well have been astonished.

Instead of a written or printed name thereon, he would have seen two birds, well drawn and accurately colored. One was a blue-jay, the other a golden-winged woodpecker, locally known as "high-holder," "yellow-hammer," or "flicker."

"Sarvent, sir!" and the digger bowed with a

scrape of his foot. "I'll be sure to call at the airliest minnit."

"You will be very welcome, rest assured of that," cordially replied Metcalf, disguising his real earnestness by a light laugh. "Come—the poison is ready for us."

"Here's luck—an' hapin' you may never know what it is to hev a hole in each pocket while the snakes is twistin' all 'round your big toes an' tryin' to swarm over the tops o' your boots! I'm lookin' at ye, pard!"

He hastily swallowed the liquor, wiped his bearded lips with one sleeve, bowed again, then turned and shambled out at the door.

"He'll call—oh, yes!" sniffed Gabriel Sexton, nose in air as he vigorously scrubbed the glass used by the bumper. "When he reckons he can strike you for another drink!"

"It was the cheapest way to get rid of him."

"If you have got rid of him—but have you? Look here, Mr. Metcalf," and honest Gabriel bent forward, his face filled with grave concern; "you don't want to take too many chances in a place like Canaan. That fellow was playing a part. He runs with the gang led by Romeo Bugg. He came in here to make sure you hadn't given them the slip. Ten to one they're laying low for you this minute!"

A short, hard laugh parted the lips of the young man.

"It would be a shame to keep them in suspense, then. Good-night, Mr. Sexton."

Before the worthy saloon-keeper could utter another word of warning, Fremont Metcalf strode out of The Grave.

Yet the sober warning was not wholly lost on him, impetuously as he acted. He cast a keen glance around him, his right hand clasping the butt of a revolver, ready to draw and fire at the first sign of an ambush.

So far as he could see, there was not a living being in the streets near The Grave, and he walked swiftly back to the hotel where his sister was anxiously awaiting his coming.

Long before he reached that point, however he detected a number of skulking shadows in the gloom, and his young blood ran a little more rapidly through his veins as he anticipated an assault; but in this he was agreeably disappointed. If the phantom-like figures were really dogging his footsteps, they took good care not to come within fair eye-range, and Fremont Metcalf reached the steps leading up to the hotel-front without molestation.

Rather recklessly he paused here, turning and facing the gloom without, pistol in hand. He seemed to defy his enemies to take his life. Though so much depended upon his life, just then, he could not resist the rash impulse. His fiery spirit was stirred as it had never been awakened before, and could he have had his choice just then, all those who hated or feared him in Canaan would have stepped forward then and there, to fight it out once for all!

But the mute challenge was not accepted. His enemies had a less perilous course mapped out.

Turning, Fremont Metcalf entered the hotel. The street door opened directly into the office and bar combined. The landlord, "Honest John Forbes," was the only occupant, just then, sitting in a chair tipped back against the wall, comfortably snoring away, but at the entrance of the young man, he tipped forward and awoke, smiling sleepily.

"Got back a'ready, hey? Don't take you long to view the elephant. See any fun? They's mostly lots of it layin' 'round loose, in Canaan, fer them as goes whar it is."

"Back again—yes. If any person should call and ask for me, Mr. Forbes, will you kindly direct them to my room?"

"Sartin'—be sure! You 'xpect somebody? Thought you was a plum stranger in these parts?" placidly queried the host, deeming it his duty to display a certain amount of interest in the affairs of those who honored his establishment.

But Fremont Metcalf gave him scant satisfaction, for he turned away without a reply, passing from the bar-room into a narrow hall, from there up the creaking stairs to the second story of the hotel.

It was a rather pretentious structure, this Occidental Hotel, considering the size and age of Canaan. Two full stories in height, containing over a score of sleeping apartments upstairs, and actually weather-boarded without!

Fremont Metcalf paused before a door, above which showed a faint light, rapping gently.

"Is that you, brother?" came a gentle voice in reply.

"Yes, Dinorah; open, please."

After the sound of a key turning in a lock, the door was opened, and Fremont entered the little square chamber. Closing and locking the door again, he cast his hat on the bed, uttering a long breath of intense relief as he faced his sister.

Her eyes asked the question her lips hardly dare utter, and the brother answered it instantly, his voice a strange mixture of exultation, doubt and joy.

"Yes, I have seen him, Dinorah! I have met the man who sent us that letter with the curious signature!"

"The Double Bird?"

"Yes, I heard him called Jay. That was the first bird on the card, you remember. His name must be Jay Yellowhammer, or Highholder—it can hardly be Golden-winged Woodpecker!"

He laughed, but there was little mirth in his voice. It was a poor subject for jesting, he felt. Too much depended on the anticipated interview.

Nor was his sister less grave, less agitated, as they stood face to face, looking into each others' eyes, trying to read there some confirmation of their new-born hopes.

One who saw them thus could hardly have doubted their close relationship, though Fremont was dark, while Dinorah was an almost perfect blonde. Their features were cast in the same mold, delicate, yet strong and full of character. If anything, Dinorah seemed to be the steadiest, the most reliable in sudden emergencies.

In figure she was tall, perfectly developed, her movements easy and graceful, yet full of strength and resolution. If her features were a trifle lacking in statuesque regularity, they more than made amends by their intelligence. Her full, blue eyes formed her most attractive feature. They now shone with doubting hope, soft and melting; but when a time of need should come, they could glitter with fire or blaze with a resolution which no common force could shake or subdue.

"Yes, sister, I have found our man! He will be here in a short time, if all goes well!" exclaimed Fremont, unable longer to smother his emotions.

"And his story?" breathed Dinorah.

"That I have not yet heard. The place in which we met was not suited for that. And then, I wished to share it with you, not at second hand."

"You were right," was the low reply. "Be it for good or be it for evil, we will meet it together. Why not? You and I are all—are we brother?"

It was with a gasping sob that Dinorah interrupted herself, her eyes assuming an appealing look as they gazed into the dark orbs of her brother.

"Let us hope for the best, sister," was the more composed reply. "If that hope is fated to fail us, it will only be falling back into the old sorrow, without the terrible uncertainty that doubled the pangs. It may be that those black doubts are only to be brushed away by the revelation of some blacker crime. Even that would be preferable to living on in such killing uncertainty. You must own as much?"

There was no reply. Dinorah, seated beside her brother, bowed her head in silence. He said no more, but gently smoothed her silken hair, his cheek resting against her head, his arm wound protectingly about her waist.

It was a bare and cheerless room which the candle lighted up. Some ten feet square, it contained a narrow bed, two rude chairs, a wash-stand improvised out of a salt barrel, with the front partly cut away. On this stood a tin basin. In the barrel stood a tin pail of water. Above hung a small mirror. On a rude bracket rested the sperm candle in a tin sconce.

Economy of space, and material had necessarily been kept in view while the Occidental Hotel was being built. Naturally so, since the lumber and other material had to be hauled for many a weary mile over rough trails, rather than roads.

For this double reason, the interior of the second story had originally consisted of but a single great room. At first this was divided into smaller chambers by stretching canvas screens. In time, the canvas was replaced by lumber, not much more substantial or effective in preserving privacy.

The ceiling was about nine feet high. The partitions, arranged precisely as are the intersecting strips of pasteboard which market-gardeners use to keep eggs from coming in contact with each other while being shipped, were only seven feet from floor to top. Thus, if desired, an inmate of one room could, by standing on a chair, look over the mock barrier to leisurely inspect the apartment of his neighbor.

For some minutes brother and sister sat in silence, each struggling with emotions which words are totally powerless to properly paint. Then, with a sigh, Dinorah drew herself erect.

"Enough of this, brother! We have sighed and brooded too many hours away already. It is time we were working."

"We can do nothing until our correspondent comes," replied Fremont. "The rest remains with him. I visited the place he appointed, and gave him the signal agreed upon. I let him know that we were ready and waiting for his further action. Until he makes that, we are helpless."

"You should have brought him with you—you ought never to have lost sight of him, once found, until his secret was yours," impetuously uttered the maiden, her eyes flashing.

"And by so acting, endangered all!" a little reproachfully. "You remember his words. I must follow instructions without a mistake, or

his lips would be forever sealed. I was to receive and answer a signal which was plainly stated. Then I was to wait for his next move. You remember?"

"Yes, and I ask pardon for my hasty speech," gently replied the young woman. "But it is so hard to wait longer—how long one can only guess—after all we have suffered in mind—oh, brother! sometimes it seems as though my poor brain would give way with this frightful suspense!"

"Patience—and courage, sister! It will soon be ended, now. Let's hope all for the best. Who knows? By this time to-morrow we may be sitting in company with him—with our long-lost father! Think of that!"

"I do—I have; but somehow I cannot make it look like the truth," was the broken response. "Think of all these long years of silence! No, brother; now that the crisis seems so close at hand, I believe this man has lied to you, only for—"

"I say! Tetch 'er up light, in thar!"

A husky, uncouth voice uttered the words, and following the sound, brother and sister started to their feet as they saw the ugly, hairy face of a stranger staring at them over the low partition. And swiftly Fremont's pistol covered the head!

CHAPTER V.

THE DOUBLE BIRD DECLINES TO SING.

WITH the rapidity of a jack-in-a-box the shaggy head vanished from view, but in its place came a husky snort of mingled disgust and apprehension.

"Hold on, you! Don't be so 'tarnal fast ef you please! It's a white gent as you're pintin' that gun at; a vited guest, as ye mought say, so to speak!"

It was a voice whose peculiar intonations were not readily forgotten or to be confused with others, and this, with the fleeting glimpse he caught of the hairy face with its staring eyeballs, caused Fremont Metcalf to lower his pistol with a low, startled exclamation.

"Who is it, brother? Friend or enemy?" hurriedly demanded Dinorah, a sharp click emphasizing her words.

Fremont turned quickly toward her, to see a revolver in her hand, pointing steady as fate at a point of the frail partition beyond which could be heard the shuffling sounds of the audacious intruder. A hand, white and delicate, but which did not tremble or fumble with the dangerous tool it now clasped so firmly. One could have sworn she knew how to use it, and to use it well.

With a swift motion Fremont caught the weapon and checked her hand just in time to keep a bullet from penetrating the frail partition in search of the villainous-looking eavesdropper.

"Do not shoot, Dinorah!" he muttered, excitedly. "I know him now—I recognize his voice. It is the man we expected, the man who wrote us that letter, the same one I saw when I was down town a bit ago!"

"Bet your boots it jest is!" came croakingly from behind the barrier. "An' 'durned ef this rooster ain't gwine back down town ag'in', too, ef you-all's got to keep chuckin' guns up ag'in a feller-critter's nose every time he sais howdy!"

"If your business is with us, come around to the door, as an honest man should," called out Fremont, with an effort subduing his intense excitement.

"How'n thunder's a critter to know what door's which, ef he don't skirmish 'round an' prospect? They ain't no slate hangin' out, I reckon?"

It was a sulky, grumbling tone, but from the sounds which came to their ears, brother and sister could tell that the man who had given them such a serious start, was about to follow the advice last given him. Dinorah hastily whispered:

"Go meet him, brother. We must lose no chances. He may be mad or frightened, and try to steal away. Meet him, and bring him here—even if you have to use force!"

She was terribly in earnest, her face pale, the features stern and hard-set, her eyes glowing with a light that told how deep was her interest in this curious affair. Nor was Fremont Metcalf less eager. With swift, silent motions he unlocked the door, opened it and glided out into the gloomy hall just in time to meet the owner of that shaggy pate and husky voice.

"We have been waiting for you, my sister and I," he said quietly, as he placed one hand on the arm of the fellow, as yet using no force, but ready at the slightest sign of flight to check the impulse and bring matters to a crisis.

"Durned ef I didn't think so, from the one glimp' I sorter ketch'd o' the couple o' ye. over yender," grinned the eavesdropper, half-sheepishly. "Habit o' yourn, that way?"

Despite his great anxiety, Fremont could not wholly keep from laughing at this observation.

"You took us by surprise. We expected you by way of the door, and when we saw the face of a stranger—for even I failed to recognize

you at first glance—what more natural than for us to suspect an enemy? If any blame, it must rest on yourself, for—"

"Oh! I ain't kickin', stranger," with a husky chuckle. "I'm heap satisfied to git off without worm-holes all through my wardrobe, fer when I squinted down them gun-mouths durned ef the goose-flesh didn't start out onto me so beffy you mought 'a' hung your hat onto the pimple an' not hafe try!"

"Let it pass, then, and we'll all be thankful no harm was done. Come; my sister is waiting for us."

The fellow mumbled something about not being dressed for petticoat company, but Fremont did not listen. With gentle force he carried his captive along to the door which was held ajar by Dinorah, ready to emerge and lend her brother aid in case of need. She promptly flung it wide, then closed and locked it again as they entered.

It was not a very enticing object on which her eager eyes rested that moment. If he had seemed wretchedly dilapidated and degraded in the saloon, he looked doubly so now that he found himself in the presence of a lady.

A man certainly past the middle mile post of life in actual age, he seemed still older, shattered and battered by dissipation and irregular living. He looked a moral wreck in every respect. And unless he was sorely slandered by the cunning light which glowed in his bloodshot eyes, his character was worn into filthier rags than those which served to cover his nakedness.

Fremont turned to face the fellow, saying:

"This is my sister, Mr.—"

"Call it Double Bird, fer a starter, boss."

"And as such she is deeply interested in the communication you are pledged to make."

"Not pledged—not quite so fur, boss," with a cunning leer. "Say mebbe; it sounds jest as well, an' don't speak nigh so loud, nur yit kiver hafe so much groun'. Say mebbe, boss!"

"We came prepared to meet your terms. If we keep our part of the contract, we certainly expect you to keep yours."

Fremont Metcalf spoke quietly and calmly enough, but it was evident he did so only by calling his whole powers of self-control into play. And fearing that his countenance would betray him too plainly, he turned abruptly aside, removing the utensils from the improvised wash-stand and bringing it out from the wall to serve as a table.

Dinorah, for much the same reason, placed the two chairs on opposite sides of the stand, then sunk down on the side of the bed. She was very pale now, but there was a steady light burning in her eyes that might have warned the eavesdropper.

"Sit down, please," said Fremont, taking one of the chairs himself. "Now, if you have no objections, why did you try the partition instead of coming in at the door?"

"'Cause I wasn't runnin' no chainces, boss," was the quick response. "How'd I know but they was a be-ole sting bid onder the honey? How'd I know you wasn't givin' me sawdust 'stead o' genuine oro? Nobody, without tryin'. So I tuck a look behind the curtin'. I listened to your buzzin' ontel the lady cut me deep with her hints that I was crooked. Then my honest buzzum split wide open an' 'sposed me afore I thought a word about guns an' sich like doin's—honor bright, boss!"

Dinorah shivered slightly as the repulsive wretch turned toward her, leering, bowing, plainly seeking to make an impression upon her. From the first word to the last, she detected a false and counterfeit ring in his speech, and her heart turned sick within her as she reflected that on his truth alone rested the hopes they had so fondly cherished. What if the story they had traveled so far to hear, should prove no more reliable? It was a soul-sicken thought, and she banished it as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

"You were running a worse risk than you suspect," was the grave reply. "Another second, and you might have met your death through your imprudence."

The fellow laughed, short and harshly, while his bleared eyes filled with a dull red light.

"I'd ort to be pritty well used to resks by this time! I hain't drawed a free breath sence I writ them words as fetched you here, boss—not a free breath! I was drunk at the time—drunk an' crazy-mad fer cause—or I'd 'a' bit off the finger that steered the pen as made the marks afore I'd 'a' sent it to you!"

He ceased speaking, casting a sly glance at the face of the young man as though to read the effects. He did not see much. The handsome face turned a thought paler, perhaps, and the jaws set a little more firmly.

This was all, to outward seeming. Inwardly, a tempest was raging. He thought he could read between lines, and believed his uncouth visitor was exaggerating for the sole purpose of raising the price of his secret.

"Talk of resk!" added the fellow who had given the curious name of "The Double Bird." "I never knowed what the word meant, ontel after that fool letter o' mine was writ an' sent. Sence then, every minnit hes b'in wu'th a dollar

jest to live through it—jest that, an' never a lie 'bout it, boss!"

"You are paid for running that risk, be it real or be it purely imaginary," coldly replied Fremont, his glowing black eyes striving to catch and hold the shifting gaze of his unclean visitor. "You named your own figures, and the bargain was closed without an effort on our part to beat you down, extortionate though the terms were. It is too late now to attempt to alter those conditions. Stop whining, and get down to business. In one word: what do you know of the man whose name was mentioned in your letter?"

A sullen, dogged expression chased away the look of cunning trickery, and the fellow muttered:

"Mebbe it's all a trap—mebbe I never writ the—"

"Stop right where you are, my fine fellow!" cried Fremont sternly, his eyes glittering ominously. "It's a motto of mine to make sure I am working the right trail, then press it so close that there can be no mistake made or side issues wrung in without my consent and knowledge. You did write the letter in answer to our advertisement. I have it here—deny it if you can!"

"When I see it with my two eyes, then I kin tell better," was the sullen retort.

"If I yield to you in this one respect, how am I to know you will not bring forward others equally unreasonable?" demanded Fremont, his naturally impetuous temper getting the upper hand and making him for the moment forget all his prudent resolves.

"One thing at a time, an' they'll hold out longer, boss," grinned the ruffian. "Jest now it's that bit o' writin' which troubles me the worst. Ef you're the right man, you kin show it easy enough, an'—"

"The right man? How could I know anything about it were I not the right man, as you call it?"

"You tell!"

Knowing so well the fiery temper of her brother, Dinorah bent forward and breathed gently in his ear:

"Show the letter, Fremont. It can do no harm, if you are positive he is the person who wrote it."

Almost involuntarily she added that last sentence. Why, she could not have explained satisfactorily, even to herself. The doubt struck her like a revelation, and she gave it vent.

Fremont was startled by the vague hint, and gazed keenly into the bang-dog visage of the man opposite him. What if he had never written the letter? What if he was playing a bold as well as cunning part for—what? He almost smiled as he asked himself the question. There could be no reason for any such bold and dangerous trickery.

"One word, my good friend," he said, leaning forward and tapping the bundle of dirty rags on the shoulder. "Since you hint at trickery, suppose we put it to the test on both sides. I have the letter which came in answer to our advertisement. I can show it whenever necessary. If you wrote it, doubtless you can remember its contents?"

"On'y too pesky well," was the surly reply. "Wish my fingers had tuck the cramp so bad they couldn't 'a' held a pen fer a lifetime, rather than they'd writ the pesky thing!"

"Then you admit having written it?"

"Mit nothin'. Not a durned thing ontel I see the dockymet with my own two peepers—not a thing, boss!"

"Even such obstinacy is not sufficient to save you, if I am forced to resort to harsh measures," coolly retorted Fremont. "I can prove that you did write it. I have the power to extort the truth from you, if I choose to employ such means. Not only as to the letter, but to make you confess all concerning the man that letter speaks of."

"You ain't smart enough to make a critter tell what he ain't got no means o' knowin', I don't reckon, boss."

Again Dinorah touched her brother on the arm, a pleading look in her blue eyes. It was enough. By a powerful effort Fremont Metcalf stifled his hot anger, turning his burning gaze from that disagreeable countenance, staring fixedly at vacancy until he could regain the mastery of self.

The Double Bird fidgeted uneasily on his seat, casting a stealthy glance toward the locked door. But the same crafty look showed him the silver-mounted pistol which lay so handy beside Dinorah, and he gave up the wild thought. He had seen her handle the weapon not long before, and knew she was no novice in the art of pistol practice.

Once more cold and collected, at least in seeming, Fremont Metcalf resumed his former position, drawing from his bosom the notebook which he had produced while in The Grave. From this he extracted a soiled and worn envelope which contained a half-sheet of note paper, stained and wrinkled.

"This is the letter you wrote," he said, deliberately. "It was mailed from this place, though inside you gave neither date nor address. It is signed 'The Double Bird.'"

He then unfolded the paper, spreading it out on the space between them, holding it so the fellow could satisfy himself as to the contents and writing, but still retaining control over it. And that he had acted wisely, Fremont divined as he watched the nervously twitching fingers of the rascal.

"You would like to destroy the document, no doubt," he added, with a short, hard laugh. "But I'll guard against that, since you have shown such a strong desire to back out of the bargain we made on your own terms."

There were not many words in the disputed letter. It was vilely written and more vilely spelled. It began without name or address, stating that the writer had chanced upon an advertisement in which a reward was promised to any one who could give reliable information concerning the present whereabouts of one Tucker Metcalf.

The letter stated that the writer could give the desired information, if it was made worth his while, but that he would not do so without first having a personal interview with the advertiser. If said advertiser was interested enough to pay five thousand dollars for the information, and would come to the mining-camp known as Canaan, bringing with him the inclosed card as a ready means of identification, let him do so. On arrival, he was to visit the saloon called The Grave, where he would be met by a man whom he might recognize by the five-spot of clubs.

There the letter ended, without name or signature, save that already hinted at, "The Double Bird."

"You see the letter. I showed you the card which you inclosed. You proved your identity by the five-spot of clubs, in accordance with the agreement. I am here, ready to pay you the price you demand for the information concerning one Tucker Metcalf, if it proves to be reliable. Now, Mr. Double Bird, is there any other point which you wish made clear, before we get down to solid business?" uttered Fremont Metcalf, his eyes glowing hotly, but his voice cold and even.

"I reckon it's all straight," slowly muttered the man, rubbing his bristling chin, a foxy light in his bleared eyes.

"What reason had you to suspect any different?" asked Dinorah, gently.

"Mebbe nothin' that you'd look at as solid reasons, ma'am," was his respectful response. "Mebbe I was a fool that's got skeered without sense n'r reason; an' mebbe I ain't. One thing is mighty sart'in. They's them as wouldn't make no bones o' raisin' my skelp ef they ever got a whiff o' what I set out to tell. They would kill!"

"Enough of this idle talk," impatiently cried Fremont, his face flushing. "It is no longer a question of what price you shall ask for your wares. The sum has been fixed and fully agreed upon, let the danger be what it may, real or imaginary. Now, for the second time I ask: what do you know of Tucker Metcalf?"

"Mebbe a heap; mebbe not a durned thing," was the dogged reply. "Fu'st, I want to make sure the man I knowed is the man you mean."

"I advertised the name, and you recognized it, so—"

"Names don't count, out here, boss," with a sudden grin. "A man takes 'most any that strikes his fancy; an' some that don't, too, ef the boys takes a notion fer to christen him. I knowed a Tucker Metcalf, but that ain't proof he's your game."

Once more Dinorah, better able to control her temper than the fiery youth, touched him on the arm. Bending toward her, Fremont received the softly breathed words:

"Humor him once more, brother. You have the locket. Show the picture, and make all sure before going further."

Fremont yielded, as he ever did when his reason was appealed to by his cool-nerved sister, drew a gold and enameled locket from his bosom, where it hung by a chain. Releasing it from this, he touched a spring, the locket flying open and revealing two painted likenesses, one male, the other female.

For an instant both brother and sister forgot whose eyes were curiously riveted upon their actions, and with their cheeks touching, they looked long and lovingly upon the pictured faces.

It was no disagreeable task, judging from the beauty of the one face, the proud and manly good looks of the other.

Though the fashion of hair and dress worn by the couple in the locket proved that a good many years had passed by since the likenesses were taken, they were still clear and distinct, plainly the work of no ordinarily skilled hand.

With a faint sigh, Dinorah raised her head, gently pushing her brother's hand toward the waiting man.

"Obeying the impulse, Fremont placed the locket in the grimy paw, saying as he did so:

"That is the likeness of the man I advertised for. It was taken more than twenty years ago, but if you ever met him in life, you could hardly make a mistake. Examine it closely, before you answer, for if you deny it, I'll have

the truth from your lips, if I have to extract it with red-hot pinchers."

"Twenty year is a monstrous long time, boss!" muttered the rascal, with a sly side-glance, while pretending to be very busy examining the portrait. "A mighty long time, an' makes a heap o' change in the mug of a man. It does look some'at like the critter I used to know, but I wouldn't like to say fer sart'in, without takin' a little more time fer thinkin'."

"Thinking! Of what?" demanded Fremont Metcalf, with dangerous calmness in his tones. "I have shown you the letter you wrote. I went to the place you call The Grave, and gave you the card by which you were to recognize your correspondent. You believed in my rights, then, else you would never have revealed yourself, would never have followed me here."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. Mebbe I wanted to make sure fu'st that you wasn't up to no gum game, boss."

"What do you mean?"

"That I wanted some good 'surance you wasn't one o' the gang which—"

"What gang?" sharply demanded Fremont, as the fellow lowered his voice, glancing warily, almost affrightedly about the room, like one who dreads the vicinity of eavesdroppers.

"A gang that'd kill me—you—her—a hundred more like us ef they was to even dream o' what I, like a crazy-mad idjit promised to let out!"

If not in sober earnest now, Double Bird was proving himself no mean actor. His face turned as pale as the long-accumulating mask of grease and dirt and smoke would permit. His bony fingers quivered and twitched. His bloodshot eyes protruded unnaturally from their sockets and roved swiftly around the room as his voice, always husky and indistinct, grew still more so as it lowered cautiously. The rags which covered his nakedness fluttered as his gaunt frame trembled.

"They will never be any the wiser for me," said Fremont, beginning to believe in the earnestness of the rascal. "I pledge you my sacred word of honor never to reveal your agency in this matter, no matter what may happen."

"Promises won't pay fer good whisky, no more'n they'll put wind back into a critter that the gang's hed the doctorin' of. Promises don't count mong the gang or them as they hire fer to trap a pore critter what think he mought as well make a little stake fer to keep him from the poor-house!"

The hot-blooded youth could no longer doubt the real aims of the cunning, unscrupulous rascal, and with an angry growl, he leant forward, grasping the wretch by the throat with one strong hand while the other drew a pistol, crying sternly:

"You've got to sing, Double Bird! Out with your sweetest tune, or off goes the whole top of your ugly cranium!"

CHAPTER VI.

HUNTING A FORTUNE AND FINDING—WHAT!

As he spoke, the cold muzzle of the revolver touched the forehead of the stubborn bird who could but would not sing.

Dinorah gave a convulsive start, her hand raising as though she would check the action of her impetuous brother; but then she sunk back on the bed as if resolving to let him settle the matter in his own way.

It was an unfortunate movement, if Fremont Metcalf hoped to frighten the rascal into immediate confession. Even with that fierce grasp on his throat, with the deadly weapon staring him full in the face, Double Bird noticed her action, and shrewdly interpreted it to his own interest. Surely, if there was any danger of a death-shot, she would not be so cool, so composed?

He abruak a little as he felt the metal come in contact with his skin, but there was a sulky, dogged glow in his eyes that matched his tones as he gurgled:

"Shoot—an' ye'll never git any nearder the truth then you be at this minnit!"

Though he failed to fully realize it, Double Bird was playing with his own life, just then. Naturally hot tempered and impetuous, acting first and reasoning afterward, Fremont Metcalf meant every word he uttered as his deadly grip on the hairy throat tightened, as his black eyes glared into the coloring face of the rascal, as his pistol pressed harder until it made a red ring in the flesh.

"Speak the truth, without further evasion, you dog! Tell the whole truth, or, by the heavens above us! you die! I give you ten seconds to make up your mind. At the end of that time you've got to sing straight, or you die!"

"An' you pull bemp in less'n a hour!" viciously gurgled the Double Bird, still fancying it but a scheme to frighten him into telling all, and thus cheat him of the reward.

Dinorah was able to read the face of her brother as if it were a plainly printed page, and now she saw it was time to interfere, if they were to ever learn the truth from this evil-looking wretch. Otherwise, so surely as the fierce threat had crossed his lips, Fremont would

send a bullet crashing through that plotting, treacherous brain.

"Brother," she said, one white hand closing over the revolver in such a manner that the pointed hammer could only reach the cartridge by first passing through one white finger. "Brother, do not act hastily. Try him once more. He may have reasons for hesitating, which we cannot comprehend at once. Release him—for my sake!"

That was sufficient, and Fremont Metcalf released the half-strangled wretch, drawing back his undischarged pistol.

If fiery and dangerous, these fits of passion were short-lived. And when one had passed, the young man was far easier to deal with than would have been the case had no storm-cloud swept across the sky.

Double Bird drew a long, wheezing breath as that deadly grasp relaxed, one bony paw fingering his throat as though to make sure it was all there and intact. His bloodshot eyes turned toward Dinorah with a grateful look, and there was more of truth and earnestness in his tones than ever before since that peculiar interview began.

"To you, mom, I'm willin' to chirp. You're pure white an' the clean article, ef ever there was one!"

"I only saved you from your own folly," she gravely replied. "We came here by your own invitation. We proved ourselves the right parties. We agreed to pay you your own price for the information you freely admitted you could supply. What more do you want? Why all this shifting and evasion on your part?"

"For good cause, or I'm no judge, mom," with another bow and disgusting smirk. "For your two sakes, as much as for my own hide, ef I do say it. For let the gang git wind o' these doin's, an' salt wouldn't save one nur t'other o' us."

"What gang are you alluding to?"

Double Bird cast a stealthy glance around them, suspiciously scanning the top of the partition walls. Then, leaning across the barrel-top, he huskily muttered:

"The gang that he was mixed up with."

"Their names? Their location? Who and what are they?"

Eagerly Dinorah asked the questions, but Double Bird as rapidly resumed his former half-dogged, half-foxy demeanor.

"Fust I want to make sure my Tucker Metcalf is your Tucker Metcalf. That settled, we kin go ahead like a house afire! Ef not—ef my man ain't your man—you can't expect a critter to stick his neck in a noose jest fer naught."

Back again to the old sticking-point!

Even Dinorah frowned, while Fremont clinched his hands in the struggle to keep his hot temper from flashing forth with doubled fury. It was trying, indeed!

Dinorah tapped her brother on the arm, rising and withdrawing to the further end of the room, beneath the dimly-burning candle in the tin sconce.

"There is only one way to deal with the crafty rascal," she whispered, hurriedly. "Yield to him in seeming. Tell him the story of—of Tucker Metcalf, since he will not speak unless. It can do no harm, that I see."

"Only to render him all the more impudent," muttered Fremont, irritably. "Only to give him ground for greater extortions. Don't you see the mark he is aiming at, sister?"

"Yes; but he can never reach the unattainable," was the cold reply. "Humor him at the start, and when the fight comes, he will be less prepared for it."

"As you say. Like you, I don't see how any particular harm can come of telling the story of the past."

Without another word Dinorah glided back and resumed her seat on the side of the bed. Fremont once more occupied the chair placed opposite the dilapidated rascal, and in steady, composed tones spoke:

"It shall be as you say, Mr. Bird."

He ceased abruptly as the fellow made a quick motion of one hand, grinning broadly.

"Durned ef I didn't clean fergit my manners," he said with a husky chuckle. "My name ain't Bird, though I writ the letter that way. Nur I didn't sign a lie to it, nuther, ef you look at the thing sorter poetic like. My name's Jay Flicker. That's what made me think o' the pictur' kyard, ye see."

Fremont Metcalf bowed, with a little frown of annoyance. He cared little what name the ragged rascal chose to sail under, and was impatient to get down to sober business.

"Thanks, Mr. Flicker. My sister and I have decided to meet your wishes in every respect, on condition that you are to prove equally frank."

"All I ax is to be sure they ain't no snags nur yit pit holes in the trail ahead," nodded Jay Flicker.

"Prove as good as your word, and there will be no trouble from our side, be sure of that," pointedly retorted Fremont.

"Prove that your man is my man, an' I'll chirp so quick it'll make your head swim," grinned Flicker.

"In the year 1861, a man named Tucker Met-

calf left his home and family in the East, coming West in search of a fortune. At that time, the great craze turned toward the region over which Denver now reigns, and to that quarter Tucker Metcalf hastened, to dig a fortune from the earth."

"Lots of 'em done it, too!" nodded Flicker, as the young man made a brief pause, eying the bumster closely. "Bigger lots of 'em never raised the color, though!"

"That was the case with the person in whom we are most interested, just at present," resumed Fremont, satisfied that as yet Jay Flicker was too thoroughly on guard to be surprised into anything like an admission. "For a long time the fortune he sought evaded his grasp, seeming ev'r but a little way ahead, almost within reach, but as often evading his clutches."

"Gospel truth an' common as di' sech cases," nodded Jay Flicker. "I'd orte know, fer hair't I bin thar, throu' an's o' times. Hain't I stretched my arms clean out o' jint reachin' fer the pesky willerwisp? Bet your boots! An' I hain't ketch'd the blame-thing yit—I hain't!"

"So fate seemed to play with Tucker Metcalf," quietly resumed Fremont, patiently bearing with these blunt interruptions. "A score of times he wrote home on the very verge of success, only to write again and explain how narrowly he had missed success."

"Hed a fambly, then, did he?"

Fremont hesitated before replying, glancing toward Dinorah for counsel. She made a slight gesture of assent, and placing more confidence in her judgment than in his own, Fremont spoke freely:

"Yes, he had a family. He was happily married. Both himself and his wife had been brought up in the lap of luxury, never knowing what it was to want for money or aught that their fancy craved. They were rich when they married, but then came heavy reverses. Never mind how. Enough that they found themselves, if not in poverty, in comparatively cramped circumstances. They had sufficient to live on, in an humble way, contented with their former station in life; but Tucker Metcalf was not satisfied with this. He was too proud to serve where he had reigned, and so he started out in search of a fortune."

"He had one child, a boy, two years old when he left. In a few months more, there came another; a little girl baby."

"Which they named her your sister. I shouldn't wonder?" shrewdly ventured Jay Flicker, his little eyes glowing.

Again Fremont hesitated to reply, and once more Dinorah silently signed for him to speak openly. She was keen enough to divine that Jay Flicker had guessed at the truth from the outset, and that nothing could be gained by trying to hide it. Besides, woman-like, she fancied the ruffian would be easier to deal with when once he knew their close relationship to the long missing man.

"You are right. She was my sister. Since then, nineteen years have passed, and she is a woman grown."

"Fine as they make 'em, too!" with a fawning bow.

"Drop that, if you please, my man," quickly uttered Fremont, his black eyes glowing. "Your compliments are neither agreeable nor necessary. It's business we met to discuss."

"I didn't mean no 'fense," sulkily.

"Nor is any taken. Go on, brother."

"As time went on, the letters written by Tucker Metcalf to his wife came fewer and further apart. He was spending more time away from the settlements, prospecting, still hoping to strike it rich, still chasing the fortune which ever seemed to elude his grasp by but a hair's breadth. The oftener he failed, the more stubborn grew his resolution to never give over until one of two things happened. He would win riches, or die in the quest."

"With heap odds onto the last, you bet!"

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded Fremont.

"Nothin', on'y in a gin'ral sort o' way. I wasn't thinkin' o' your dad in pa'tic'lar. On'y o' the many pore devils that've found a grave whar they looked fer a fortin'," was the quiet reply.

"Tucker Metcalf may have found the grave, but we know he first found the fortune which had so long escaped him. It was in '64 that we heard from him last. He wrote in high spirits, a little incoherently, as though his long-delayed good fortune had proved almost too much for his sorely tasked brain. He said that the tide had turned at last, and poured a golden stream into his lap. That he was rich enough to snap his fingers at those whose noses turned up at the reduced family. He had made his fortune, and was coming home!"

"Which he didn't do, I reckon, or you wouldn't be lookin' fer him here, after all them years hev gone by?"

Fremont leaned across the rude stand and gazed steadily into the eyes of Jay Flicker as the latter slowly uttered these words, more in the shape of an assertion than a query.

If there was a cunning, foxy light in those bleared eyes, they did not flinch from that burn-

ing gaze. If not perfectly honest in his dealings, Jay Flicker certainly was not wholly lacking in a certain sort of nerve.

"No," slowly added Fremont, sinking back in his seat, his voice growing grave and gloomy. "No, Tucker Metcalf never came home, with or without his long-sought fortune. That joyous letter was the last one ever received by his patiently waiting wife. Patiently until the days rolled on and mounted up into weeks and months. Then her fears grew with the passing time, and her heart turned sick as she waited. Waited until the day of her death for the coming of the husband whom she was fated to never again meet on earth!"

"That's the wust o' the cussed gold!" muttered Jay Flicker, his voice seeming more husky and thick than usual. "It turns a man into a machine which keeps a-goin' an' a-goin' ontel it jist wars out fer want o' rest an' greasin'. An' it s'arves the hearts o' them whar cain't do nothin' but wait at home, the same way—on'y more so! It's a bitter cuss, that same gold, when ye look at it in the sober light o' reason—but it buys mighty good whisky!"

Struck by his earnestness, beginning to believe that this was yet another of the victims to the terrible gold-fever, her hopes growing as she listened, Dinorah sunk back with a heart-pang as he added those flippant words with a sarcastic grin. Surely there was little to hope from this man's sympathy! He could be touched alone through his pocket.

"In '64, you say was the last hearn o' your man?"

Fremont bowed, his face growing paler.

"The time suits well enough. Go on, ef you please."

With a slightly brightened countenance, Fremont complied.

"Our mother did what she could, though that was little. She had not much money. Her relatives were all dead or far away and lost to sight. That letter was postmarked at Denver, and there she caused inquiries to be made. Without success."

"Some were there who remembered something about Tucker Metcalf, but they could not say where he was nor what had become of him since he left that region two years before. When they last knew of him, he was poor—so poor that he often went days without eating."

"No one could tell anything about his finding a fortune. And when her money was all spent, the poor woman knew no more than she had when those inquiries began."

"Well, time passed on. Sister and I continued to grow in body and mind, but before we could fully understand what made our mother so sad and sorrowful, she died."

The strong young voice faltered and ceased. Silently Dinorah stole her hand into his, and thus they sat for several minutes, Jay Flicker innocently staring at the wooden ceiling above his head, softly whistling. Then Fremont resumed his story, with recovered composure.

"When she died, our mother left us to the care of one who had, in those last days of sorrow and privation, proved a true and faithful friend. Under his care sister and I were reared to man and womanhood. From his lips we learned the truth, so far as known, of our father. We were then old enough to realize what it all meant, and when our guardian died shortly afterward, he left us sufficient money to take up the search for the missing man where it was abandoned, years before."

"Acting on his advice we advertised freely in all the papers which were published or which circulated principally in the mining-regions, and one day there came an answer to one of those advertisements. What that answer was, you know."

"I reckon," slowly uttered Jay Flicker, as the young man paused and gazed keenly into his face.

"It bade us call at Canaan, and in obedience to it, we set out at once. Now we are here—now you have acknowledged writing that letter—we will listen to your part of the story."

"That fri'nd o' yours left you pritty well fixed, no?"

"We have sufficient to pay the price you put on your knowledge," shortly replied Fremont.

"Jes' so! Waal, the two stories fit pritty nigh even, so fur; but they ain't many sure things in this yere worl' that cain't hold a slip-up somewhere into 'em. Mebbe you'd let the ole man take 'nother squint at that pictur'!"

Without a word, Fremont Metcalf pushed the leeket toward him. His face was white and hard set, his eyes glittering with a light which should have warned the rascal who was so coolly calculating on their anxiety for a long-lost parent.

Dinorah read her brother more accurately and she leaned toward him, breathing in his ear words so gently modulated as to entirely escape the keen hearing of Jay Flicker.

"Be guarded, brother! Do naught rashly!"

There was no reply in words, but she could not misinterpret that steady, burning glance. Jay Flicker must speak out and tell all he knew concerning Tucker Metcalf, or pay the penalty of his treacherous obstinacy.

"I don't reckon thar's two of a kind in this," slowly observed Jay Flicker, closely scanning the handsome, happy-looking face in the locket. "Looks a bit finer then he did when I knowed Tuck Metcalf. Different rig onto him; an' then he hedn't the time nor the money to spend in gittin' shaved an' ha'r cutted, ye see. Yas, I reckon I kin say that your Tucker Metcalf an' my Tucker Metcalf was one an' ondivided, like!"

"When did you see him last? Is he still living?" eagerly demanded Fremont, his voice strained and agitated.

"Your dad, I b'lieve you said?" asked Jay Flicker, with provoking deliberation, closing the locket and curiously looking at the richly chased and enameled outside.

Dinorah touched Fremont on the hand, and the fierce outburst was delayed, if not entirely quelled.

"Our father—yes."

"Ready to pay pritty big fer solid news o' him, too?"

"Else we should not have come here. The money is ready for you, sir, the moment you convince us that your news is reliable. Every dollar shall be counted out to you."

"How much did you say, boss?"

"Your own figure—five thousand dollars!"

Jay Flicker slowly shook his shaggy head in disapproval.

"Tain't enough, boss."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?" cried Fremont, his tone hoarse and strained. "Those are your own figures!"

"Which I ain't denyin' of 'em, fur as that goes," was the deliberate response, though the extortioner shrunk a little from that honest and fiery indignation. "That was my size when I writ the letter, but then I didn't know you was huntin' fer a long-lost daddy. My price has riz sence I disklivered that 'portant fact."

With one hand restraining the fiery youth, Dinorah faced Jay Flicker, her face pale as death, but her voice steady:

"In one word—your price now?"

"Ye see, mom, this is the idee: When I fu'st writ, I was on a big drunk, an' didn't take everythin' into 'count. I didn't low fer the resk I was runnin' from the gang. I didn't count the chainces o' thar ketchin' me sellin' out thar secrets. Nur I didn't even so much as think that it was a dear lost pap you was axin' fer."

"And now?"

"All them things show up mighty big to a pore devil like me, mom—almighty big! Fu'st the resk I run. That's wu'th all the money I axed you at fu'st, but I don't want to play the hog with a lady. Then the dad part is wu'th as much more. Say ten thousand fer what I kin tell, an' it's a whack!"

Still restraining Fremont, Dinorah replied:

"You ask too much, sir. We are poor. It took every dollar we could raise to come here and offer the sum you first demanded. Take that, and keep your faith. Believe me, it will be your wisest course. Such treachery can never prosper!"

Jay Flicker grinned his defiance.

"You don't dast to try powder or lead, fer I run with the gang an' they'd make it mighty onhealthy fer even a woman, ef she tromped onto the toes o' one o' the famby."

"I have made no threats," coldly retorted Dinorah. "But I repeat the warning. Take the sum we have raised for you. Tell the true story of Tucker Metcalf, and we will not only bless and thank you, but we will stand between you and the gang which you appear to dread so greatly. Be honest. Do not forfeit all by striving to grasp too much. Once more, and for the last time: will you take the five thousand dollars and give us the promised information?"

"It's too little. Make it ten, an' it's a whack!"

Without another word Dinorah released the arm of her brother. Whether or no such was her meaning, Fremont Metcalf no longer fought against the wild, insane fury which filled his heart. With a hoarse, choking cry, he leaped up and grappled with the treacherous villain.

"You devil! you've gone too far! I'll tear the secret from your heart, though I hang for murder the next minute!"

With a crash, the rude stand was overturned. The light went out, and with a shrill scream, came a sharp pistol-shot!

CHAPTER VII.

CHISPA CHARLEY—THE MAN WITH A RECORD.

ROMEO BUGG was not feeling very chipper when he reeled out of The Grave, a few minutes after the precipitate flight of his "heelers."

The glass was heavy, and flung by a powerful arm. The shock alone was sufficient to lay an ordinarily tough man on the flat of his back for a day or two. Added to the copious flow of blood, and the manner in which he had been treated by Old Forked-Lightning, it was little to wonder at that the man of insects felt like "crawling into his hole" for the time being.

But this feeling did not last long. For nearly a year Romeo Bugg had flaunted the proud title of chieftain through the streets of Canaan

without having to defend his claim. He knew that he was a good man, physically speaking, and hence it is not strange that he attributed this immunity to his personal prowess. But he knew—none better—that it only required a single defeat to strip a chieftain of all previously won laurels. There can be but one "best man" in a mining-camp. And let the man to whom every knee has been bent in homage for months or even years, once own a victor, and he will find a dozen rivals spring up from among those who, only a day before, were glad to sun themselves in his shadow.

Scarcely had he left The Grave, before these ugly and disagreeable thoughts began to flock through the whirling brain of the giant bully, and with a savage oath he turned to retrace his steps, weakness and superstition alike forgotten.

Fortunately for him, he was now in the midst of his gang, and they assumed control of his movements for the time being.

"It's on'y waitin' a bit ontel you kin see straight through the double sights, boss," muttered a husky voice which illy suited one who claimed to be a bird twice over, even though neither are patterns of harmony.

"They'd all two both jump ye the fu'st ha'r ye showed in the door," added another.

Never mind the peculiar arguments which they made use of to turn the battered giant back. Sufficient that they gained their ends, and led the blinded bully away to safer quarters.

Jay Flicker abandoned the party before it reached its destination, but if his absence was noticed, no comments were made. Somehow those who knew him best, appeared to appreciate the Double Bird the least.

There were enough left to care for the temporarily fallen giant, and under their experienced if rude ministrations, Romeo Bugg soon assumed a more reputable appearance.

By what to them seemed a very lucky chance, neither of his eyes had been seriously injured by the fragments of glass. Romeo would bear the scars of that encounter to the grave with him; his nose would never be as straight nor as comely as of old, since the bridge was thoroughly crushed; but mere comeliness of person and regularity of features counted for very little in the estimation of one who had "hed no use fer wimmin" since the hour he left his mother's breast.

"What does it add up to, anyhow?" said one of his chief assistants, with the lofty indifference to trifles which mark one who sees, but suffers not. "A scratched up face, which I've seed a heap wuss come o' tryin' to kiss a ole maid ag'in' her will. A nose that'll smell a drink o' bug-juice or a fight jes' as fur's it ever did. In a couple o' days, you won't know you ever run ag'in' one o' Fatty's glasses, unless it's when you happen to ketch a glimp' o' the boy as did the tossin'."

That conclusion was like flaunting a red rag in the face of a *banderilla* maddened bull. With a roaring curse, Romeo Bugg leaped to his feet, scattering his "heelers" like chaff before the wind, though his rage was not directed toward them.

"Gi' me back my tools, cuss ye!" he snarled, glaring about him in quest of his belt of weapons which had been removed from his person while under treatment. "Eyes or no eyes, I'm gwine to cut that young cock's comb ef it kills me! No sech runt shell hev a chance to make his brags that he got the best o' Romeo Bugg. Gi' me my tools!"

"Sart'in you shell hev 'em—why not?" soothingly answered one of the gang, a covert glance assuring him that the weapons were securely hidden. "It ain't one o' your fri'nds as 'll deny ye, ole man, when—"

"Durn the palaverin'—whar's my tools?"

"Ready fer you, when you're ready fer them, never fear."

"Ain't I ready? Cuss you, 'Gene Dibble, I'll—"

"No you won't Ro," was the cool retort, and the tall man boldly confronted the fuming desperado, one hand on his pistol while the other was shaken significantly before the bandaged face. "You're goin' to listen to a fri'nd."

"You can't choke me off o' that—"

"Nur I don't mean to try," was the blunt interruption. "Ef you didn't take it up, I would, fer the credit o' the gang. An' it's fer that same credit I'm talkin' now. You come mighty nigh gittin' the wu'st of it, a bit back. Why? Bec'ase you let your mad git away with your good sense. You'd do it all over ag'in ef I was to let ye belch out now, hafe-cocked. An' wuss then that, you'd raise the bull town ag'in' the gang!"

"Tain't you I ax fer teachin', 'Gene Dibble," sullenly.

"Tain't me that would offer sech, ef you was your own self, Ro. But you ain't. That tumbler sorter knocked ye off yer base, an' I'm tryin' to set ye back onto it ag'in. Who was you goin' fer, ef I hedn't stepped atween, jes' now?"

"Fu'st fer that dandy runt, an' then fer the ole cuss!"

"Didn't I know it?" with a half-sneer. "I ain't countin' the young feller. He knocked you down, an' you're boun' in fightin' honor to

git even if it takes a leg. But not the ole 'coon, Ro."

"Why not?" fiercely. "Didn't he—"

"Say he did, an' let it go at that. Times in Canaan now ain't like they was a year ago. You can't hop onto the ole man without gittin' the hull town down onto the gang; an' that the gang cain't a'ford, jes' now—you know it, Ro."

The face of the desperado altered, as though he only too readily interpreted the meaning of that significant tone; but he was like a bulldog—hard to choke off when once he saw his prey before him.

"He done me dirt all over, cuss him!"

"Somethin' like that, I'm not denyin', Ro. Ef it cut so deep ye cain't bear it, git even; but not so's your han' shows too plain. Tackle him when nobody cain't shoulder the work on you. It won't do to come out in the face o' day an' do it—you know that."

"He's no more'n a man, anyhow," muttered the giant, but at the same time casting a wary glance around as though he felt the assertion was only lip deep at best.

"Good as they make 'em, then," was the grim retort. "But say he's on'y a man. He cain't be jumped without the best part o' the camp takin' sides with him. An' the head one would be Chispa Charley. He's on'y a man, too, you'll say? Waal, I reckon so. But he's a man that nine out o' every ten sportin' men in camp will foller like he was a king. That's the sort o' man he is!"

"He kin crow loud, but what's he done?"

"All he says, an' more too. I knowed him afore he struck this locate. He got a record years ago, an' one that even you cain't hold over, Ro. But let that go. It's settled, then, that you ain't to run over Old Forked-Lightnin'!"

"Hev it that way ef ye like," was the sullen reply. "I won't go out o' my way to tackle him; but he's got to keep his own furrow, white head or not."

"If he goes out o' the way to pick onto you, drap him, in course; nobody cain't blame you fer that. What I am argyin' ag'in' is your makin' a open hunt fer the ole coon. The camp wouldn't stan' that, Ro."

"Waal, it's the young critter I want the wu'st, anyhow. You ain't standin' up fer him, be ye, 'Gene?"

"Not enough to do any hurt, Ro. The gritty little critter pumped it into ye too hefty fer that!"

"Got away with me, eh? Wiped the floor all up, I reckon?" uttered the desperado, with a sickly but dangerous grin on his plastered face.

"That's what the town will say when it gits good spread over, Ro. It won't count that he tuck you off your guard. It'll say that you held the drop, but wasn't man enough to keep it. An' he a tenderfoot, too!"

The fellow showed his hand more clearly, now that he believed he had wrought the giant up to the proper pitch. The result proved his judgment right. Romeo Bugg had thoughts only for the young stranger and how to get even with him.

"The town'll never hear of it from him, 'Gene. Whar's my tools, I ax ye once more!"

With cheerful alacrity Dibble produced the hidden implements of the desperado's calling, and even buckled the belt about the waist of his chief, saying:

"Thar they be, Ro. I only wanted to make sure you was your own self fu'st. You're sure your peepers is fit fer work?"

"I'll make 'em fit."

"All right. Jest one word more. You want to wipe out all that come off in The Grave, don't ye?"

"An' I will, sure!"

"Ef you say that, et's 's good 's done. But lis'en, pard. You know you've got some inemies in camp. Not open ones, but the sort that stings a feller from behind an' under kiver. You don't want to give them any bigger hold than they've got now, do ye?"

"Out with it, durn ye fer a lawyer!" grated the giant, his eyes glowing redly. "You al'ays travel a mile to kiver a rod. Out with it in plain words."

"Jest as you say, Ro. It's for your own good that I'm doin' so big a bit o' thinkin'. I want you to git hunk with the boy, an' at the same time putt a bit 'twixt the teeth o' them as is on'y too glad to git a chance o' backbitin' ye."

"Now, ef you was to jump the critter on sight what would they pertend fer to b'lieve? That you tuck him from abind, or got some sech 'vantage as made your work sart'in sure without any resk to your own self. That's what they'll say, Ro."

"Not afore my face, they won't!"

"It's words ahind one's back that sticks the tightest, Ro. You cain't feel 'em or see 'em thar ontel they works clean in to the hide; then you hev to dig 'em out. Don't give 'em the chance. Do this job up in ship-shape fashion, Ro; make it 'cordin' to Hoyle, an' it's all your way then."

"Anyway, jest so it comes off."

"Then how do you like this fer a programme? We'll take a walk over to the Occidental."

The young feller hangs out thar. I see him when he come in an' putt down his name. We'll ax fer him, civilly an' ca'mly. Ef he shows up, you'll tell him he ain't no man ef he don't give you a chance fer to git even. Ef he don't—waal, you'll jest leave word that you're on the war-path, red-hot. Then, when you meet, you kin drap him in as big a hurry as you please, an' nobody cain't say a word."

Through all this the gang had listened intently, confining their part to whisperings and noddings whenever some point struck them favorably or otherwise. But now, as their chief instinctively glanced toward them, as though to see how the idea of Eugene Dibble struck them, a chorus of approval burst from their lips.

Naturally enough. By following the line laid out, they were sure of seeing some sport, without any danger to themselves. And it may be doubted whether many of them cared one grain of sand which of the prospective duelists came out on top. Such is the nature of the beast!

Chief though he proclaimed himself, Romeo Bugg dared not run counter to such a strong tide, and with sullen fierceness he inspected his weapons, putting fresh cartridges in each pistol and assuring himself that the cylinders revolved freely.

His cunning point won, Eugene Dibble gracefully retired into the background, leaving Bugg to engineer the rest for himself. He knew that, once started in a certain groove, the big desperado was too sluggish of mind to easily be cast out of it. And with the grim pleasure of a cunning man who sees another doing his work for him, he watched and waited.

There was little delay, after Romeo Bugg had fairly assumed the lead. He knew where his enemy was in hiding, as he preferred to call it, and at the head of his tough gang, he left the isolated shanty and sallied forth, bound for blood!

Taking a cross-cut, the Occidental Hotel was reached without encountering any one who could possibly carry the alarm to the intended victim, and with a rare degree of order for men of their class, they mounted the steps and filed into the combined bar and office.

At first glance the place seemed deserted by all save the worthy host himself, and Romeo Bugg strode up to him with the air of one who meant business, pure and unadulterated.

"How, Uncle John," he exclaimed, in a voice which he meant to make bluff and hearty. "Whar kin a man find a spruce young critter as hangs out here—calls hisself Bulcalf, or some sech outlandish name?"

"Metcalf, I reckon you mean?"

"Durn the name! It's the man I'm wantin'. Whar is he?"

Honest John Forbes did not reply immediately. He had no particular love for the big desperado, while he had taken quite a fancy to his young boarders from the East. True, he had not heard of the quarrel that evening at The Grave, and Fremont Metcalf, before going up to his room, had particularly directed him to send up to that room any person who might call and inquire for him. But Forbes saw that Romeo Bugg had been engaged in some sort of a row, and from the manner in which he spoke, fancied he had no love for young Metcalf.

"He hain't skun out, hes he?" growled Bugg, grating his teeth savagely. "He hain't run away 'thout payin' his debts?"

"What does he owe you?"

"A life, durn an' double durn his mazzard! Call him down to face his master, or we'll go through your ole shebang as—"

"Won't I do just as well?" asked a clear, mellow voice.

Quick as thought Romeo Bugg wheeled and faced a man who had until then been sitting quietly in one corner, partially hidden by the door, reading a newspaper.

"Chispa Charley!"

"Exactly, my dear fellow," bowed the other, showing a set of remarkably fine teeth. "And entirely at your service."

Romeo showed his teeth a little, but it was after anything but a savage fashion. Indeed, despite his claim to being a "big chief" of Canaan, he was plainly afraid of this cool, polite sport, whom people called "The Man With a Record."

Save for a certain suspicion of flashiness in dress and profusion of jewelry, the man who owned to the peculiar name of "Chispa Charley," might easily have been mistaken for a business or professional man, off on a vacation.

He was a little above the ordinary height of Americans, lacking a couple of inches of touching the six-foot standard. His figure was strong and muscular, without being in the least clumsy. His movements were graceful, quick, lithe and easy. His head was well balanced, his hair cropped short, curling in tiny rings of jetty darkness, lying close to his skull. His face was smooth-shaven, the features strong and resolute, rather than handsome. Except when he smiled; then, with firm red lips, even, white teeth, a dimple in each cheek and another in the center of his chin, Chispa Charley looked like an entirely different person from the terrible fighter he had the credit of being.

He wore coat and pantaloons of black velvet,

bound with wide silk braid. Wearing no vest, he showed an unusual quantity of linen, ruffled and richly embroidered with silk. A collar, broad and unstarched, was fastened at his throat with a curious nugget of native gold. Like ornaments served instead of buttons on both shirt and coat. A chain of nuggets hung around his neck, attached to a watch hidden in his waistband. A band of the same precious "chispas" encircled his white hat; and of them all—nearly a hundred in number—not one but what appeared just as it had been taken from the earth.

A gold-studded belt of black leather encircled his trim waist, and though no weapons were visible from the front, both friends and enemies knew that Chispa Charley never went without them, waking or sleeping.

As though by chance, Chispa Charley had placed himself between the roughs and the door. Romeo Bugg saw this, and it by no means decreased his uneasiness. He feared this cool, devil-may-care sport, though when out of his presence he affected to hold him and his prowess in high scorn.

"I hain't got no quarrel with you, Chispa Charley," he said, with an ugly grin that had a double purpose; to serve as a defiance in the eyes of his mates, while it should conciliate the gambler.

"Which is the same as saying that you have with Fremont Metcalf?" easily retorted the sport.

"Ef I hev, what is it to you?" sulkily.

"One moment, my dear fellow; don't get ahead of the schedule, please! You come here to pick a quarrel with an inoffensive young fellow. With a man who is a stranger in town, a new hand to our wild and woolly customs. A man who, I dare say, never saw a shot fired in business style. And you call yourself a chief—a big fighter, right from head water!"

"They's a matter atween him an' me that'll take blood to wash out!"

"So much the worse for you, Romeo," was the careless reply.

"What you mean by that?"

"Business, Romeo; business clear up to the handle!" laughed Chispa Charley, showing his white teeth. "Ever since I hung out my shingle in Canaan, I have tried to keep the camp at least half-way decent, though you and your gang have made it mighty difficult business. Being a bashful fellow, if I have got a record, I've let a good many things pass without saying much, rather than push myself forward. But the line must be drawn somewhere, and I draw it deep, right here!"

"You call yourself a bad man and a mighty fighter. Now instead of picking on an inoffensive stranger, why don't you prove your sand by tackling a man with a record?"

"I hain't no quarrel with you," sulkily muttered Romeo.

"You'll have to have one, if you think to crowd Metcalf."

"I didn't know he's a fri'nd o' yours."

"I wouldn't know him from a side of sole leather! Never met the gentleman in my life—but I know he is a gentleman, else you wouldn't be picking a row with him."

"Old Forked-Lightning gave me the office, and asked me to take his hand for the rest of the game. He had to run from the whisky, else he'd have seen the game through himself. To please the old gent, I said I'd hang around and offer myself to you as a substitute, if your appetite really demanded the blood of a fresh victim. When will you begin to devour me?"

Romeo Bugg, flushed, stung to the quick by the careless scorn which filled every word, every look of this dare-devil sport, glanced quickly around at his comrades. If he hoped for aid from them, he was doomed to disappointment. Though ten to one, the roughs were plainly cowed!

"Make it a free game, if these gentlemen like," carelessly uttered Chispa Charley, rightly interpreting that glance.

Before any reply could be made, there came a startling interruption from above stairs. A loud crash—the shrill scream of a woman—the report of a pistol!

"Good Lawd!" gasped Honest John, starting toward the hall. "It's Miss Metcalf! Devil's work goin' on—help, gents!"

Prompt as were his movements, those of Chispa Charley were still more active, and before one of the others had stirred, the Golden Nugget Sport was out of the office and half-way up the steep stairs.

Was it instinct that led him direct to the room occupied by Dinorah Metcalf? Or was he better acquainted with the new-comers than he professed?

Be that as it may, one thrust of his broad shoulders sent the frail door from its fastenings and let a faint light in on a thrilling, tragic scene. One glance, then he darted to where a rude lamp was hanging at the head of the stairway, snatched the light down and hastened back, in company with Honest John Forbes.

Dinorah Metcalf was lying partially on the bed, her white face turned upward, like one done with this life forever.

Fremont Metcalf was just staggering to his

feet, looking dazed and bewildered, gasping painfully. Blood was streaming freely over his face, making a startling contrast to the ghastly paleness of his skin. In his right hand he clutched a revolver. Only for an instant. Then, as he caught sight of the white face of his sister, he dropped the weapon and staggered to her side, a gasping, incoherent cry parting his lips.

And there, by the overturned stand, lay another form, motionless, still and ominous. And creeping slowly along the bare floor toward the horrified witnesses, was a red rivulet.

It was blood, flowing from the veins of the man lying so still. From the veins of Jay Flicker. And he was dead, with a bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEAD MAN'S CHAMPION.

At a single glance Chispa Charley took all this in, and his first impulse was to shut the terribly significant details out from all else; but there was no time for that.

Close at his heels puffed and panted Honest John Forbes. Not far behind him came waddling the fat hostess of the Occidental. And already the alarm had spread over the house, the dark corridor beginning to fill with curious witnesses.

For one moment he hesitated, his eyes glowing redly; then his resolve was taken. There must be no appearance of fear or anything like concealment.

Honest John brushed past the sport and dropped on his knees beside the motionless body from under which stole that terribly significant red rivulet. He lifted the head to his knee, bending it back so as to bring the rays of the dimly burning lamp upon it.

It needed but a single glance to satisfy two important points; the identity of the man and that he was indeed dead. This was not the first time Honest John had been called on to make similar examinations in the course of his checkered life.

"Jay Flicker—an' too dead to skin!"

There was more of wonder than of excitement in his tones and less of regret than either. Least of all did it contain anything like a charge of wrong-doing, but with a sharp, agonized cry, Fremont Metcalf started up from his kneeling position beside his senseless sister, a wild light in his staring eyes, his face deeply lined and haggard.

"It's a lie! I never killed him! I never even touched him with such intent! There were others in the room, who—"

With a swift stride Chispa Charley crossed the intervening space and grasped the half-crazed youth by the arm, his other palm dropping firmly across the trembling lips, cutting the wild speech short.

"For your life, keep silent!" he hastily muttered, bending his head so that no other ears could catch his words. "Lock your lips and utter not a syllable until you have fully recovered your senses. It's a true friend that bids you."

Mechanically Fremont Metcalf obeyed, but as the Man With a Record rose erect and glanced around the increasing crowd of witnesses, his white teeth came together with an almost savage click. He saw that those wild words had been heard and would be remembered, to be repeated whenever called for.

Outside the room, but still plenty near enough to see and hear all that might pass within the chamber, were Romeo Bugg and the members of his especial gang. Little chance that they would forget a single damning point, or give the wretched young man the benefit of a doubt.

For one instant Chispa Charley almost resolved to clear the crowd away by force of arms, if necessary; but that idea was abandoned almost as soon as born. Any attempt at secrecy at this stage of the lamentable affair would, in the end, make matters look still worse for Fremont Metcalf. There must be good and reliable witnesses to all their movements from this on until the end was reached.

"Fall back, gents, and give room for Mrs. Forbes; there's a young lady suffering here. Make room—or shall I?"

There was, so to speak, a cold fierceness in his last words that acted like magic. The crowding ranks opened and rolled back, leaving the entrance clear. Sobbing, panting, looking as though she had been half-squeezed to death by the excited spectators, the corpulent landlady reached the bedside.

Fremont Metcalf stared at her half-vacantly for an instant, then grasped her arm with a trembling hand, whispering:

"They haven't killed her, too? She is alive?"

Instantly Chispa Charley was beside him, his firm, magnetic touch checking the outburst which the sport dreaded.

Glancing rapidly over the crowd, Chispa Charley uttered:

"Some one of you go for the doctor."

"And the marshal, while you are about it!"

Chispa Charley started, a momentary frown contracting his brows as he heard that clear, cold voice. It proceeded from the lips of one whom he had not before known was among the

witnesses, but he saw him now. And he knew that any objection which he might raise would as surely be turned to the disadvantage of the young man whom he had sworn to befriend.

"Thank you, Colonel Teemer," he said, with a brief nod and fleeting smile. "You took the words from my mouth. The marshal, too, of course."

Betsy Forbes, as big in heart as she was in frame, as motherly as corpulent, had been giving all her attention to the motionless form which lay across the bed. A heaving sigh told how greatly she was relieved when she saw that Dinorah was in a swoon, rather than the embrace of death. And relieved from this tragic fear, as she glanced around at the curious crowd, her womanly nature found vent in an indignant explosion:

"You John! look at them gawpin' critters! Clear the room o' the hull kit, unless you want me to do it! Send 'em packin', this minnit! It'd scare the seventeen senses out o' the poor gal ef she was to come to an' see 'em all gawpin' at her, like she was a travelin' menadgery! You John!"

"You hear, gents?" said Honest John, extending his arms and waving them much as he might if trying to clear a garden of a drove of intruding swine. The majority promptly fell back, but one man stepped forward; the same whom Chispa Charley had addressed as Colonel Teemer.

"Let the room be cleared, by all means, save of a responsible few to take charge until the proper officers arrive," he said, his voice sounding cold and hard. "But the proper way will be for you to convey the young lady to some other room."

"I'd like to know what you got to say 'bout it?" snapped the landlady, sharply. "This is her own room, duly 'gaged an' paid for. Better get out, y u!"

"It belongs to the law just now, my dear madam," with a low bow and icy smile. "There has been murder done, and—"

Chispa Charley stepped forward, slightly showing his teeth.

"Are you not taking a good deal for granted, colonel?"

For answer, the colonel pointed to the prostrate form as it lay in a slowly-widening pool of its own blood.

"All killings are not to be called murder." "Until they are proven to be justifiable homicide they are, I believe."

For an instant Chispa Charley hesitated. In that brief space Colonel Darius Teemer drew frightfully near his own grave, if the truth must be told. If he was aware of the fact, not a change of muscle told as much. Cold and stiff he stood before the Gold Nugget Sport, a champion of the dead man.

"Stan' up to him, kunnell!" came a peculiar, squeaking voice from the gloomy hall. "Fa'r play for Jay Flicker!"

One keen glance in search of the speaker, then Chispa Charley gracefully gave way, saying:

"Since they put it in that light, let it be as you wish, colonel. The lady shall be taken to some other room."

"Thank you, sir. I only want what's right. There has been a man killed here, and as a lover of law and order, I deem it no more than fair to see that the matter is fully investigated. To do so, the officers of the law must find things as nearly as they may be—"

The sentence was cut short by the landlady bluntly pushing him to one side to make room for Chispa Charley, who gently lifted the unconscious maiden in his arms and bore her from the room.

Fremont Metcalf, still stunned, still bewildered, started to follow his sister, but Colonel Teemer instantly interposed.

"You can't leave this room for the present, sir," he said, in cold, harsh tones, pushing the young man back with his left hand, the other half-hidden behind his hip.

"She's my sister—they've murdered her, too!" muttered Fremont, passing one hand across his bloody brow.

"Your sister is in good hands for the present. You will only injure your own case by trying to leave this room."

"I am going to her—my sister! She is all I have left, now! Who are you, sir?" with a sudden outburst of baughty rage and surprise. "How dare you stand in my path? Out of the way, or take the consequences!"

The half-crazed youth drew back his clinched fist. The colonel stepped back a pace, his right hand coming forth from its hiding, clasp a revolver. But it went no further. A strong hand closed around his wrist and wrenched the weapon from his fingers, and as he turned with an oath on his lips, he was confronted by Chispa Charley.

"You, Colonel Darius Teemer—drawing on a crazy man?"

Low and even the tones which pronounced these words, but they stung like a slap in the face, they were so full of mock surprise and a contempt that was plainly genuine. The colonel flushed vividly, then turned a sickly white.

"Crazy or not, he was trying to escape!"

"From what, pray?"

"From this room—from the consequences due his crime!"

"My dear colonel don't you think you are taking a good deal for granted?" softly smiled the Man With a Record.

Almost choking with rage, the other pointed to the dead man lying on the chamber floor.

"He murdered that poor devil, and—"

"Not so fast, my dear sir," sharply interposed the Gold Nugget Sport. "You are making a serious charge. Are you quite prepared to back up your words?"

"If need be—yes!" was the firm retort. "A poor devil has come to his death by violent means. Instead of bending your energies toward finding and properly punishing the vile assassin, you seem to wish to shield him from the just consequences of that dastardly crime. I don't wish to engage in a quarrel with you—with any man, for that matter—but as an honest man, I am going to perform my duty, though an army stops the way!"

"Good fer the kunnell!" squealed that strange voice which no one seemed willing to acknowledge.

Fremont Metcalf, who had been staring stupidly from one to another of the disputants, plainly puzzled to comprehend the meaning of it all, now touched Chispa Charley on the arm.

"They have carried her off—my sister!"

"She is in good hands, and will soon be herself again," gently replied the sport, leading the young man back to the bed, sitting down beside him. "Try and clear away the cobwebs, my friend! Look around you, and try to recollect what has happened. Here, taste this; it may help to clear your brain."

Pouring a little brandy into a silver cup which formed a portion of the flask, Chispa Charley with gentle force compelled Fremont to swallow the potent liquor. Its effect was almost magical. The wild light fled from the black eyes, and a trace of color came back to the pale cheeks.

"What has—I know now?" and his eyes were averted from the silent figure on the floor, a shudder creeping over him.

"Keep it all to yourself, then," hastily whispered Chispa Charley in his ear. "The friends of the dead man are threatening to make you trouble about it."

"But I swear I didn't—"

A firm palm covered his lips, just as the crowd parted to suffer two men to pass and reach the chamber of death.

"Leave all to me," muttered Chispa, giving the trembling hand a warning pressure, as he rose to his feet.

He saw that Colonel Teemer had intercepted one of the men, whispering earnestly in his ear, while the other passed on and knelt beside the body, without a glance around him or a word to anybody.

Only for a few moments; then he rose, saying gravely:

"There is nothing for me to do here, gentlemen. The man is dead. I doubt if he ever drew a conscious breath after the bullet struck him!"

With a quick step, the other man crossed the room and tapped Fremont Metcalf on the shoulder, saying sharply:

"Reckon I'll have to take charge of you, stranger!"

At nearly the same instant a hand lightly touched his shoulder, and wheeling quickly, he met the cool gaze of Chispa Charley. Then, soft and mellow, accompanied by a slight smile, came the words:

"Don't you think you're rather rushing matters, Dave?"

The marshal nodded toward the corpse, then glanced back to where the colonel stood, cold and composed.

"Reckon not, Chispa. Yonder lays Jay Flicker. You heard Doc say he was dead, didn't ye?"

"He spoke plainly enough, certainly," the peculiar smile growing brighter.

"He was killed, wasn't he? An' this young feller done it, didn't he?"

"Who says my friend killed Jay Flicker?"

"I say so!" and Colonel Teemer stepped forward. "I say he killed him, and as an honest man, I mean to see justice done to all—both the dead and the living!"

Chispa Charley bowed low, the cold smile slightly revealing his magnificent teeth.

"Very prettily spoken, colonel, particularly that part which touches on honor and justice."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Teemer, his dark eyes glowing wickedly, his strong hands clinching.

"Nothing, if you disclaim your right to the words. If you prefer, I'll put a head on them both—make them dishonor and injustice. And still you are not happy!"

Decidedly the colonel was not happy! He felt the sting which was hidden beneath that smooth, bland tone, and he heard the low snicker which broke from one of the witnesses. For one fleeting moment, he seemed about to leap at the throat of the insolent sport; but then he shrugged his shoulders, laughing harshly as he replied:

"I'm not to be drawn off on a side issue, just at present, Mr. Hampton. After this affair is settled, I may see fit to ask an explanation of your very obtuse jest. Marshal, do your sworn duty—arrest that young man!"

Dave Long looked irresolutely from one to the other for a moment, then muttered to Chispa Charley, apologetically:

"You see? I've got to do it, old man!"

An impatient motion of the sport's hand checked him.

"Colonel, do I understand you aright?"

"Wasn't my words plain enough?" coldly retorted the other. "Then I'll speak them over. Jay Flicker has met his death by foul means. I charge yonder young man with being his assassin. I demand that you, Marshal Long, arrest him for that murder, and hold him in charge until his guilt can be proved!"

"That's your record, Colonel Darius Teemer, is it?" and Chispa Charley drew his athletic figure erect, his dark eyes flashing wickedly. "Very well. Now listen to mine."

"Fremont Metcalf is my friend. You have brought a foul charge against him. You have got to prove that charge is true in every respect, or I will do my level best to convince you that a mistake of this sort is worse than a crime!"

There was not a trace of excitement in his voice or manner, but even those to whom he was a comparative stranger, could not for an instant doubt that Chispa Charley meant every word he said—more: that Colonel Darius Teemer would have to eat his words or else meet the Man With a Record in a duel that could only end in the death of one or both.

The crowd was eager to see which horn of the dilemma the colonel would select. Nearly everybody present knew him more or less well; not one, however, could claim any intimacy.

The colonel was from Tinker's Dam, a ways down country, and there he reigned almost supreme. He was the heaviest capitalist in all that section, owning many paying claims, in addition to the widely known mine, Better Yet, the yearly out-put of which mounted high into the hundreds of thousands.

A tall, portly, well-preserved man, whose fifty odd years had barely sprinkled his jetty hair and whiskers with silver, he was probably as good a man, physically speaking, at that moment as ever before since attaining his majority.

Though he had been in business for years in the rough mining regions, the colonel had never, so far as the public could say, "made his record" in duel or street affray. And it was to see whether he was lacking in that prime requisite of western popularity, "sand," that the crowd so eagerly waited.

"I think I comprehend your meaning, Mr. Hampton," the colonel said, speaking slowly, coldly, his strong face hard-set. "I make no pretensions to being a fire-eater. I don't want a row with you; but if I am attacked, I shall do what I can to defend myself. All your bluster cannot make me alter my determination to see justice awarded the guilty. I stand by the law, and I call on these gentlemen to aid me in having it carried out, let the blow fall where it may."

There was a little stir among the spectators that showed how agreeably they viewed this appeal from the rich man, and Chispa Charley saw that he would only prejudice his case by pulling directly against the tide.

"Very well, colonel; we will let the personal side of the matter drop out of sight for the present, since it goes against your stomach. I never crowd an unwilling adversary."

"You appeal to the law. You love the law. You want these gentlemen to help you enforce the law. All right. I take the same trail and follow your lead. You ordered Dave Long to arrest a murderer, I believe?"

The colonel bowed, puzzled by this sudden changing of tactics. What did it portend?

"Of course you or Dave can show a warrant for arrest?"

"There is none needed, when the assassin is caught red-handed, in the very act of murder!" cried the colonel, quickly.

"You saw the deed with your own eyes, then? You were present when the shot was fired, of course?"

The colonel flushed hotly, then grew pale.

"You know I was not," he muttered, sourly.

"I thought so, but your positive manner made me almost believe my brain was growing soft, or that my eyesight had gone back on me, bad!" laughed Chispa Charley, with a playfulness that seemed grotesque, with that bloody corpse lying nigh.

"There is proof enough," nodding toward the corpse. "You yourself found the body lying there—you saw that young man drop the pistol with which the crime was committed. So I have heard more than one of these gentlemen state," the colonel added, turning again toward the crowd.

"Ef he didn't, a good dozen o' us did!" cried Romeo Bugg.

Chispa Charley glanced scornfully toward the giant, whose plastered face rose above those in front of him, but he deigned no reply to the hostile outburst.

"It is the law you asked for, colonel, not vague supposition nor idle guess-work," he said, coldly. "I'm going to give you the law in heroic doses, never fear. There can be no murder without a corpse. Where is that corpse?"

"At your feet, man!" irritably uttered the mine-owner.

"I see something that looks as though it might possibly be the body of a man; but the law has not pronounced him dead. I believe it was the law you wanted?"

A short laugh broke from one in the crowd, and Chispa Charley suffered a faint smile to momentarily curl his lip. He saw that the witnesses were beginning to shift their positions; that the tide was beginning to turn his way.

"This is worse than nonsense!" growled Teemer.

"It is the law you fell in love with a bit ago, colonel," bowed Hampton, mockingly. "Don't go back on your true love, I beg of you: I haven't showed you half its beauties, yet."

"You charged my friend with being a murderer! Where do you find the law for that?"

Teemer doggedly pointed to a corpse.

"Still harping on the old string! The music has fled from it forever, colonel, dear! Not a note left, play you never so adroitly. In the first place, the law has never pronounced that the body of a man. It has not said that body is dead. If dead, it has yet to decide what killed him. For all you or I know, he may have committed suicide!"

"Bah! that is rank folly!"

"Nevertheless it is law—and law you were bound to have, colonel," laughed the Gold Nugget Sport; then his manner abruptly changed to one stern and cold.

"I am a law-abiding citizen, in every respect, and the man does not live who can truthfully say I ever flew in the face of law. This young man is a stranger in our midst. He has got over head and ears into trouble, neither you nor I can say exactly how. That constitutes him my friend, though I never met or interchanged a word with him before this hour."

"If it be fairly proven that he is a murderer, let him pay the penalty. But until the law declares that a murder has been committed—until the coroner sits on that body and the lawfully sworn coroner's jury brings in a verdict of guilty against Fremont Metcalf—all Canaan cannot arrest him without first walking over my body! If you think so, Colonel Teemer, try it on!"

Rapidly these words issued from the firm lips of the gambler, and as the last defiance passed them, Chispa Charley drew a brace of revolvers, glistening with gold, and took his stand before the pale young stranger.

CHAPTER IX.

PREPARING FOR THE WORST.

COLONEL TEEMER involuntarily recoiled a pace as Chispa Charley shot out that defiant challenge. His usually florid face turned ashen gray, and something that was almost fear came into his dark eyes. Only for an instant did he suffer these symptoms to betray him, however.

Swift and crafty, his eyes roved over the crowd just outside the chamber of death. He recognized some there on whom he could depend for almost any sort of work, but there were others whom he could not so entirely trust—some who actually seemed on the point of cheering the bold speech of the steel-nerved sport.

It was a frightfully bitter pill for one so proud and self-loving to swallow before so many witnesses, but Colonel Teemer was far from being an idiot. He knew—or thought he knew—that he had the majority of hands among the crowd of witnesses. He believed they would fight hard and stubbornly in obedience to a single word from him; but would it be worth the cost?

A short, low laugh came from the lips of the Man With a Record; evidence at once of his remarkable nerve and the keenness of his perceptions.

"I wouldn't if I were you, colonel. It would break the law you love so dearly all to pieces, to say nothing of still dearer things. Your dogs might bark, but your ears would never hear them."

"As you say, this is no place for a personal row," coldly replied the colonel, once more his former self.

"That row will never come off, unless you try to impose on good nature, dear sir, or to curtail the natural rights of my friend, Mr. Metcalf. You have had your say-so, and I've given you mine. It only remains to carry out one or the other. If you are the strongest, no doubt your idea of the law will come out on top."

There was a brief pause. Colonel Teemer shrugged his broad shoulders, dropping his gaze to the silent form lying on the floor almost between them. Chispa Charley regarded him for a moment, then glanced rapidly over the men without. He saw that Romeo Bugg and his especial gang were still hanging on the outskirts, their heads close together, as though some sort of a consultation was taking place be-

tween them. If this surmise was true, it was not difficult to guess against whom those deliberations were directed.

During all this, Fremont Metcalf had remained silent, his brain still confused, his senses in a mad whirl, though he was slowly getting the better of his strange mental weakness. The wild light was dying away in his eyes. The ghastly pallor of his face was lessening as his shattered powers gradually came together in something like their natural order.

After that keen, searching glance over the crowd, Chispa Charley turned his gaze toward the young man, the hard light in his eyes growing softer as he noticed the blood still running down the pale face.

"Doctor, will you kindly take a look at my friend?"

"If he will permit me—certainly," was the prompt reply, for Doctor Peter Peters was one of the most kindly and open-hearted men in the world, in love with his profession and ready at any time to exercise his skill without a thought of fee or reward—until afterward.

Ignorant how far his friend had recovered, Chispa Charley turned to make sure the doctor was rightly received. It was but for an instant, but when he turned again, he saw the right hand of the colonel drop to the side of its owner, while one or two men from the outer edge of the crowd were making all haste down the stairs.

The face of the Man With a Record grew darker and his jittery eyes snapped vividly. What signal had been given? What new line of play had the colonel taken up? And, above all, what cause had the colonel for so persistently trying to run Fremont Metcalf down to death?

Under the nimble, practiced hands of Doctor Peter Peters, the injury Fremont had received was examined and dressed as far as necessary. It was nothing very serious; a sharp blow on the head had partially unsettled the already overtaken brain. The skull was not injured. The scalp wound would soon heal, and the loss of blood was more apparent than real.

All this, in less time than it takes to record the fact, and while Chispa Charley was trying to solve the meaning of that signal. That it meant his new friend no good, he felt confident. He had time to give it no further consideration, and the instant the deft fingers of the doctor completed their work, his lips parted, his voice cold and stern:

"Gentlemen: you have heard the little discussion between the colonel and myself. I don't ask you which one you side with, because there is only one right side to the matter, and I will not insult men of your caliber with hinting that you could take the wrong one. I will simply say this:

"I am going to take this gentleman, my particular friend, to his sister, to relieve the minds of them both. If he is wanted for anything particular, you will know where to look for him. Until then, permit us to bid you a very good-evening!"

Like one entirely at his ease, Chispa Charley turned on his heel and took Fremont Metcalf by the arm. But those whose eyes are the keenest, saw that his unoccupied right hand covered the major portion of a revolver.

At this moment there was a rapid trampling on the stairs as of several persons hastily ascending, and Colonel Teemer turned swiftly in that direction, the motion carrying him between the door and the Man With a Record.

"Hyar he is, kunnel—he's comin'" cried a man who ran hurriedly through the narrow hall. "Make way thar, you critters—make way for the crowner!"

There was a peculiar glitter in the black eyes of the colonel as he turned just in time to see Chispa Charley draw the arm of the accused man through his own, that betrayed his agency in this fresh arrival; but the Gold Nugget Sport gave no sign of uneasiness or anger, his voice cool and steady:

"Open a passage, if you please, gents; it's too warm weather for crowding to be either comfortable or healthy. Colonel, you are blocking the way. Oblige me?"

"The coroner is here. Wait until the affair is settled in accordance with the law as you laid it down, Mr. Hampton."

The tone in which these words were uttered was such that the most fastidious could not have objected to it, but there was a glittering fire in the eyes of the speaker that showed he fancied an important point gained.

Not so Chispa Charley. His red lips curved in a pleasant smile, but it was something like the playfulness of a tiger.

"Sorry to cross your hopes again, colonel," he said, his tones smooth and even as silk, "but I never go back of my word when it is once passed. I said I was going to take Mr. Metcalf to the room where his sister is awaiting him. You are barring the passage. Oblige me!"

His right hand moved suddenly and rested for an instant on the shoulder of the man from Tinker's Dam. Something harder than flesh and bone gently tapped that shoulder, and as he instinctively glanced downward, the colonel caught a glimpse of a polished pistol-barrel.

Without another word he stepped aside, and

with Fremont Metcalf on his arm, Chispa Charley passed through the doorway, the crowd dividing to give him free passage. Nor was a hand lifted to bar his passage. Not a word of objection was uttered, even by Romeo Bugg and his evil gang of desperadoes.

It was only one man among nearly a score; but that man had a record to which not one of those present cared greatly to add by seriously obstructing his march. Perhaps the glittering pistol, now fully revealed, one white finger inside the trigger guard, had something to do with the remarkable unanimity which governed their actions.

A low, mocking laugh broke from the lips of the dare-devil sport as they cleared the ranks.

"It was easier done than I anticipated," he uttered, with a careless glance over one shoulder. "After so much growling, I really expected to see some genuine biting."

"Thanks to your nerve," huskily uttered Fremont, seeming far more nearly his usual self, since the skillful ministrations of Dr. Peters.

"It didn't take so much nerve to face down those varlets—hardly a true man among them all," laughed Chispa Charley.

Then his tone suddenly changed as he came to a halt not far from a closed door, over the top of which came a dim light.

This room was situated at the opposite corner from the one in which Jay Flicker had met his death. It was hidden from the view of any person near the chamber of death, and was only to be gained by a side passage, similar to the one first used.

"I suppose I owe you an apology for taking your case so entirely in my own hands, Mr. Metcalf," said Chispa Charley, speaking hurriedly, his voice grave and earnest.

"It was the act of a true friend, and I am more grateful than I can find words to express," said the young man, his voice broken, his eyes dimming. "I was all broken up. I didn't know what I was doing or saying, and—"

"Let it go at that, my friend," kindly interrupted the gambler. "Time is too precious to waste in idle words. You are not yet out of danger. You have bitter enemies, who seem determined to bring your neck to a noose."

"They cannot! I have done nothing to deserve—"

A white hand slipped gently over his lips.

"If all who stand inside of Canaan's limits this night were to receive their just deserts, methinks it would make a most edifying picture—but let that go. Justly or unjustly, my dear sir, there will be a verdict brought in against you, of murder. That much is cut and dried. And almost as certainly you will pull hemp in consequence, unless you get out of the wilderness by the shortest possible route."

"Your sister is in that room. If you cannot bring yourself to leave without a parting word with her, go and make it as short as nature will let you. I'll wait and watch here until you come out. Then—well, it will take more than one man to bar the way when I bid you go!"

Fremont Metcalf stood gazing fixedly into the face of the gambler as these words were rapidly uttered. Gradually his pale countenance grew flushed, and it was with all his old fire and energy that he made reply:

"From any other lips, that advice would be an insult bitter as death itself!"

Chispa Charley shrugged his shoulders a trifle.

"You object to running? Well, the best of men sometimes find their heels mighty convenient, my friend. I don't think you fully comprehend the situation. A man has been killed. Circumstances have mixed you up with that killing. An inquest will be held, and a verdict rendered. If that verdict is given against you, as it can hardly happen otherwise, your death is a moral certainty unless your heels can save your neck."

"And if I flee, what will be said? That conscious guilt and a craven fear drove me to flight! No, sir! As Heaven bears me now, I never harmed a hair of that poor fellow's head! His life was far more valuable to me, just now, than even my own!"

"Even so; innocent men have been hung before now, and all according to the law, too. Escape while you may, and live to prove your innocence."

Fremont shook his head resolutely.

"You forget my sister. I will not run, let come what may. I am innocent of any wrongdoing. There is no blood upon my hand. I will not give people the chance to say there is, by running away from the law."

Chispa Charley grasped his hand and shook it warmly.

"Good enough! I glory in your spunk! We'll stand our ground, and give them all the fighting they can stomach—perhaps just a trifle more!"

As he uttered these words, the gambler moved toward the door and gently rapped. A moment's silence, then came the unmistakable tones of Betsy Forbes through the keyhole.

"Who's there, an' what you want?"

At a motion from Chispa Charley, Fremont answered and had no difficulty in satisfying the

worthy landlady. She turned a key and opened the door, permitting Fremont to enter. She would have shut Chispa Charley out, but for that he was too well prepared, and slipped inside almost before she realized his purpose.

Fremont hastened to the side of the bed on which Dinorah was lying. She sprang up and they were fast locked in a warm embrace, she sobbing, he almost as strongly affected.

Chispa Charley watched them for a moment, then turned to Betsy Forbes, tapping her on the shoulder, speaking rapidly:

"Now, aunty, this bids fair to be an all-night's session. Will you prove true to your motherly heart and see that these young people have something nice to keep them up? Say a little strong coffee and a few bites—but you understand?"

Without stopping to see whether she did or not, Chispa Charley, with gentle force worked her to the door and outside, promptly closing and locking it after her. Then he turned to the young couple, doffing his hat and bowing respectfully as Dinorah rose to meet him.

"You are his friend? You are the gentleman the landlord spoke about—the one who so boldly took poor brother's part in his trouble?" she hurriedly uttered, extending her hand.

Chispa Charley made a movement as though to accept it, but then bowed low, his face flushing hotly as he drew back his partially extended hand. Dinorah looked at him in momentary surprise, but the danger which she knew threatened her dearly beloved brother quickly drove all other thoughts away.

"I am his friend, as far as one in my position can prove himself a friend, Miss Metcalf," said the Man With a Record, his form rigidly erect, his face as composed as it was pale.

"He is innocent—he never killed that wretch!"

"So he says, and I believe him."

"If all were as ready to be convinced!" muttered Fremont with a faint smile.

Chispa Charley took one step forward, stooping a little so he could look directly into those blue eyes. Dinorah met his steady gaze without flinching, though her face lost the faint flush which the coming of her brother had brought back.

Chispa nodded, a grim smile curving his firm lips.

"It is the true stuff I see there, Miss Metcalf. I can speak to you without mincing my words?"

"In anything that concerns poor brother, you will find me strong," was the simple reply.

"I am glad—very glad; for your own sake, quite as much as for his," was the quick response.

"You'll find her the best man of the two," added Fremont with a faint smile. "Talk freely, and don't fear for her. Dinorah will be a tigress in my behalf, if needs be."

"She can do you better service as a woman, I hope and trust," said the Man With a Record, that rare smile illumining his strong features until they became actually handsome.

"Tell me what to do, and if it lies within the power of a woman whose love makes her strong and resolute as a man, it shall be performed. Hide nothing from me, through a mistaken fear that it will prove too heavy a load for me to bear. Forget that I am a woman; only remember that my life lies bound up in his."

She moved to the side of the young man whom circumstances had so cruelly involved; she placed one arm over his bowed shoulders, half-protectingly, all lovingly; she bent her proud head and touched his forehead with her lips. Then she drew her queenly figure erect and faced Chispa Charley, waiting.

His dark eyes drooped for an instant, as though he feared they would speak too plainly the intense admiration he felt for this woman, the like of whom he had never met before in all his wild and checkered career. Only for a moment; then he caught her eyes and spoke rapidly, clearly, without reserve.

"It is a bad-looking affair, Miss Metcalf. A man has been killed, and though such a worthless brute is better out of the world than in it, he belonged to a gang that will do all they can to avenge him, either by means of the law or else by more underhand means."

"Fremont never killed him!"

"In that we are all agreed. But somebody did, for though such a miserable wreck, Jay Flicker was too big a coward to take his own life. Unluckily everything points to your brother, as the slayer. If he was my brother, I would unhesitatingly advise him to admit the killing and—"

"Brand himself as a vile assassin? And you pretend to call yourself his friend?" cried Dinorah, her eyes flashing, her red lips curling with angry contempt.

"All killing is not murder, Miss Metcalf," was the composed reply. "One man way kill another in self-defense."

"I'll never swear to a lie," interposed Fremont, steadily. "I did not kill him. On that ground I stand, to live or die!"

"I only made the suggestion; it is for you to accept or reject it," was the quiet explanation. "Now I must deal a little with personal matters, to explain my future course."

"Miss Metcalf, my name is Charles Hampton."

better known in these parts as Chispa Charley. I am a professional gambler. That name does not carry with it all the odium it implies to one whose life has been passed east of the big rivers. Out here a man may be a gambler, and yet retain the reputation of an honest man, if not exactly a gentleman. Still, even here a gambler is not the best advocate and friend one in such peril could have. It was well enough for me to stand up for your brother before the law came into the case. But now—you need a man to help you against whom no possible slur can be cast. That man I have in view. You know him," turning abruptly toward Fremont. "I speak of Old Forked-Lightning."

A doubting expression swept across the young man's face.

"You fear he is too eccentric?"

"I should put it crazy!" with a faint laugh.

"And in so doing, you would be mistaken," was the firm reply. "You could not find in all the land a man who can do more for you in this extremity than that same person. Still, if you are unwilling to trust yourself with him, I will try to find some other substitute."

"Why any substitute?" suddenly asked Dinorah, her eyes seeming to read his very thoughts, so intently did they regard him. "You have courage, address, keen wits; and more than all, I can read a firm conviction of his innocence in your eyes!"

Chispa Charley flushed warmly and his dark eyes drooped. This speech, coming from those red lips, was very precious to him—more precious than he dared admit to his own heart.

"I do believe in his truth and innocence, as fervently as I thank you for your good opinion, Miss Metcalf. But still I must repeat that a gambler—the associate of gamblers and their acknowledged head—would prejudice your case from the very outset. I will not desert you, be sure of that; and if the worst comes to the worst, it will not be all one-sided. When the coroner has once arrived at his verdict, then the gambler can take a hand in the game, if it is necessary."

"He must know best, Dinorah. Let him have his own way."

"You, Miss Metcalf, will be the best aid your brother can have, for that matter. The coroner is in that room, and there will be an inquest with little loss of time. You and your brother will be summoned as witnesses—that of course. You know he is innocent, and when you tell the jury as much, they will be either more or less than men if they decline to believe your statement."

"Now I must go, to find Old Forked-Lightning. I will send Mrs. Forbes up to stop with you. Keep up your courage, and try to believe that the clouds will soon pass over."

Chispa Charley turned toward the door, but paused, then gave way to a sudden impulse. He strode to the bedside and warmly grasped the hand of the young man. He glanced almost timidly toward Dinorah. She extended her hand. He caught it between both of his, pressed it gently, bent his head and barely brushed the warm skin with his lips, then turned and hurriedly left the room.

The warm flush upon his face fled as he beheld the tall form of a man standing motionless in the gloom, like one on guard. His voice was low but hard, and almost fierce as he strode forward and confronted the sentinel-like form.

"You here, Dave Long! By what leave or license, pray?"

It was indeed the Marshal of Canaan, and there was a revolver held on cock in his right hand.

"It's me, Chispa," came the quiet response. "I'm here by orders, to see that young Metcalf don't take too long a walk for the good o'—waal, we'll say justice."

For one instant Chispa Charley hesitated, his strong hands clinching, his eyes glowing wickedly. But only for a moment did the temptation last, and when he spoke it was coldly:

"Be careful, Dave. You'll answer to me, if any crooked work takes place here while I'm gone. You understand?"

"I'll do my duty, break or make, Chispa," was the quiet response, and then the Man With a Record passed on.

CHAPTER X.

WHO KILLED THE DOUBLE BIRD?

It really began to seem as though Tinker's Dam had lent a goodly portion of her population to old Canaan, her younger sister, on this occasion. Tinker's Dam furnished the corpse, the coroner, and Colonel Darius Teemer, to say nothing of other personages of somewhat less importance just then.

Wesley Whitecap, M. D., Physician and Surgeon, was the legend displayed on his shingle, and there were those among his enemies who bluntly declared that his parents made the young Wesley a doctor because he wasn't fit for anything else—which was a base slander, of course. Certainly he made a very good coroner, looking so wise and owl-like when presiding over an inquest that it was enough to frighten the truth out of the guilty, just to take one little look at his honor.

He had come to Canaan on purely unprofes-

sional business, but as the rumor of trouble at the Occidental Hotel spread rapidly through the town, he was on his way to ascertain how much was truth and how much wild exaggeration; he was met by one of the men whom the colonel had sent out in quest of him, giving them their orders through that silent signal which Chispa Charley was just too late to intercept.

Wesley Whitecap was never so happy as when he could earn a fee and please his rich patron at the same time, and almost broke into a run as the message was delivered him. And thus it came about that he appeared on the scene just as Chispa Charley was on the point of taking Fremont Metcalf from the chamber of death right in the teeth of his enemies.

Colonel Teemer quickly drew the coroner into the room, and in a hasty, guarded whisper made him acquainted with the main facts, adding:

"You saw that young fellow with Chispa Charley? He did the killing, and may try to give you the slip. Wouldn't it be just as well for you to send some good man to keep an eye on him? Dave Long, for instance?"

If not a model of wisdom, if not strictly honest, Wesley Whitecap at any rate tried most manfully to make himself believe he lacked nothing in either respect. In truth, he was a man who meant well, but lacked ballast.

He thoughtfully stroked his pointed chin with thumb and forefinger, his mild blue eyes blinking feebly as he glanced around the chamber, making him more than ever resemble some huge, exaggerated owl in human shape. Then he nodded abruptly, having convinced himself that this was the wisest as well as the proper course to follow.

"I should say Mr. Long would be precisely the person to keep an eye on the movements of the ah, the suspected party. If you, dear sir, can see no serious objections to such a precaution, it may be as well to lose no more time."

"My dear doctor!" exclaimed the colonel, in tones which were plainly audible to all. "Why ask me? I have nothing to say, now you have arrived. You are conducting the case now."

And the owl-like coroner actually began to believe he was!

Dave Long, true to the core, meek as a lamb in peace but a lion in war, knowing nothing of law and its devious forms, putting his trust wholly in those who were elected for the purpose of interpreting the law, received his instructions and at once took up his position outside the door of the room in which he could distinguish the voices of Fremont Metcalf and his sister, together with that of the Gold Nugget Sport.

Meanwhile the coroner was proceeding after his painfully deliberate fashion in the chamber of death. He assured himself that the dead man was Jay Flicker. He made another examination to be absolutely certain there was a dead man. And then he began to think about forming a jury.

Perhaps it was a whisper from the colonel that hurried him to this action. Honest man though he was, Wesley Whitecap paid close attention to what the colonel said and thought. A poor man himself, he revered riches and rich men. And then, though no one would more indignantly deny its connection than the coroner himself, Teemer held two or three notes signed by Whitecap, all of which were overdue and unpaid.

The jury was selected from those present, and Colonel Darius Teemer was immediately elected foreman. The room was cleared of all outsiders, and the jurymen, one after another, gravely advanced and inspected the corpse, as though they had never seen it before that instant.

Still, it was in strict accordance with the forms laid down by the law, and the coroner was satisfied.

The door was then opened, and the jury, led by the coroner, was about to file out, intending to seek a more comfortable and commodious apartment for their deliberations, when Colonel Teemer beckoned Dr. Peters to enter, muttering a word in his ear as he led him to the side of the dead man. He stooped as the doctor knelt beside Jay Flicker, adding in a whisper:

"Cut out the bullet and be sure you save it for the jury when you are called to give your evidence. You understand?"

"Fa'r play, kunnell!" cried a sharp voice, causing Teemer to start suddenly erect and turn around, his face flushing hotly with rage and surprise. "Fa'r play an' all 'bove board, kunnell, ef you please!"

The curious group without the door precipitately gave way and through the passage thus formed, a ragged figure stalked, Old Forked-Lightning in person.

For one instant the colonel stared in wide-eyed astonishment at the weird shape, then he spoke sharply, demanding:

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"That you're takin' a mighty sight o' intrust into this case, 'pears to me, fer a outsider," was the cool reply.

"As an honest man, I am eager to see justice done to all—to the dead as well as the living."

"A mighty sight more dead than livin', a body'd say, to judge from the way you act!"

"Peace, gentlemen!" uttered the coroner, interposing with all the dignity lent by the majesty of the law. "This is too grave a case to be disturbed by idle bickerings. Doctor Peters, will you kindly take charge of this room and its contents until you are relieved?"

The doctor bowed, rising to his feet and closing the door after them, securing it as well as its shattered condition would permit.

Old Forked-Lightning paused a little irresolutely as the coroner led the way to the room below stairs which had been selected as the most suitable in which to hold the examination, but it only lasted a moment. Then he followed after.

He entered the room close at the heels of the last jurymen, getting fairly inside before his presence was discovered. Colonel Teemer glanced at him darkly, but then closed his lips firmly. He had just placed the strange looking being. Until that evening, so far as he could remember, they had never met face to face, but he remembered having often heard of Old Forked-Lightning, and surely this must be he?

Wesley Whitecap took his seat at a small table which was provided with paper and writing materials by the attentive landlord. From a bit of paper he began reading the list of jurors, who, as their names were mentioned, stepped apart from the listening crowd. But as the name of Colonel Teemer was pronounced, Old Forked-Lightning stepped forward, his eyes flashing fire, his voice ringing out sharply:

"I object to that man's s'arvin' onto the jury, your honor, on the ground that his mind is all made up an' prejudiced aforehand!"

Swift as thought the colonel turned upon him, one hand stealing beneath his coat, his face red and angry.

"If you dare to insinuate—"

"Teich lightly with your fingers, kunnel. The gun you tote is one that kills deader at the butt than at the muzzle, when it's turned to'rds me," coolly interrupted Old Forked-Lightning, but making no move toward touching a weapon himself.

Mechanically the colonel dropped his hand, looking half-ashamed of his menacing gesture. Old Forked-Lightning laughed softly as he added:

"I ain't throwin' out no 'sinations this time. I'm talkin' mighty plain English. I say that you ain't fit to serve onto this jury; 'cause why: you've sot the guilty one down in your mind, an' that 'pinion is so firm fixed that nothin' the witnesses kin say'll change it. I challenge you to deny this!"

"I do deny it, in toto!"

"An' I've got the 'nial writ down here," said Old Forked-Lightning, tapping his forehead with one forefinger. "Mebbe you'll see an' hear of it ag'in, kunnel. Better lis'en to the ole man. Better 'sign your persision on the jury!"

"Your honor," said the colonel, turning to the astonished and bewildered coroner, "I appeal to you. Am I to be attacked after this shameful manner, while my hands are bound? Am I to be accused of prejudice against some one—the good Lord knows who!—before a word of evidence has been given in?"

"It is irregular—very irregular, I must say! The gentleman will please keep order, or I must clear the room."

"And the gentleman will please listen to this, my only answer to his base insinuations," sharply added the colonel, rising and confronting the veteran. "I claim to be an honest man. I am here to see that justice is done to both the living and the dead. I have been chosen to serve on this jury without hint or wish on my part. To resign that position would be to give my enemies a handle which they would only too gladly grasp. Unless the coroner discharges me of his own accord, against my earnest protest, I will continue to serve."

"That I certainly will not do," promptly said Whitecap.

"All right, your honor, an' you, kunnel," said Old Forked-Lightning, coolly. "Jest one more word to you, kunnel, an' words that mought be spoken by your best friend. Kerry yourself straight in the harness. Give your verdict 'cordin' to the evidence which may be brung for'ard, or you'll hev to settle with me the mornin' you step out o' court!"

While the strange being was uttering these words with a cold emphasis, the colonel watched him keenly. As he concluded, and drew a little back, he laughed contemptuously, saying:

"Bah! if you were not so plainly a lunatic, and therefore irresponsible for your wild vagaries, I would call you to account. As it is, I scorn to deal further with such an enemy."

The coroner rapped sharply on the table before him, his brow wrinkling, his lips pursing tightly.

"Come to order, gentlemen! This is a shameful waste of time, when we have so much work before us."

"The time ain't wasted ef the talk 'sures fa'r play fer all sides," said Old Forked-Lightning, nothing daunted.

"Who are you? What interest have you in this affair?"

"One that's passed his word o' honor to see fa'r play, as much as one man kin hope to kerry it ag'in a crowd."

"There has been no person accused of the crime, as yet, so there is no foundation for your wild charge to rest on."

"Then Chispa Charley lied, or some other pusson. I'll ax him who kerries the load when he comes back," quietly retorted the old man.

"He said that the kunnel was movin' heaven an' airth to dump the murder onto a young fri'nd o' his. He was called off on 'portant business fer a few minnits, an' axed me would I look out fer snags outel he come back. He axed it as a fri'nd, an' as a fri'nd I said I'd do what I could. I come here an' find the kunnel is onto the jury. That's why I kicked. An' now you've got it, judge, straight as a string!"

"In your ignorance you have suffered your friendship to carry you too far. You have bitterly insulted an honorable gentleman. If you repeat the action, I shall be obliged to have you turned out of the room."

Old Forked-Lightning listened to the slow, pompous speech with curling lip and flashing eyes. There was contempt in face, voice and every motion as he tersely replied:

"Them words come out easy, but you'd find it mighty hard work to make 'em good. You hain't got men enough in this hull court to turn me out ag'in' my will, judge, though you putt the kunnel hisself at the head o' your army! But I don't want no row. I do want to see clean jestice done. An' see it I will, or you'll hev more then the one corpus to sit onto—sure!"

Not one who had heard him speak, who saw his athletic figure drawn so proudly erect, who witnessed his cool, defiant mien, could for even an instant doubt the perfect sincerity of Old Forked-Lightning. And certainly there was not a citizen of Canaan who would have offered to carry into execution the threat made by his honor had they been called upon.

Coroner Whitecap glanced uneasily around him, unable to decide on the proper course to pursue. He tried to catch the eye of Colonel Teemer, but that gentleman had sunk back in his seat, and was now busy in paring his fingernails.

Old Forked-Lightning was the first to break the silence.

"Go on with the performance, judge. I've sung my little song, an' I reckon the music hain't all fell onto onfertile s'ile, nuther. Ef it has—waal, that's a hereafter."

Coroner Whitecap was sorely disturbed. Such a scene had never occurred in a court over which he presided, and though he was pretty well acquainted with the peculiar vagaries of the "wild and woolly West," this so far surpassed his expectations that it is not to be greatly wondered at that he forgot some of his usual ceremonies and omitted others. Still his audience was not a very critical one. All they wanted was to find how Jay Flicker came to his death, and who it was that had killed him. The rest they fancied they could manage.

After a few preliminaries, the minor witnesses were called, one after another, and gave in their evidence. This was of no particular importance, save that it put the gentlemen summoned in good humor with themselves and all the world.

They testified to hearing the pistol-shot, and shortly after a confused outcry inside the Occidental Hotel. Naturally enough, they lost little time in hastening to see what was up. They saw the body lying on the floor. Saw a young man and a young lady in the same room. The young man looked as though he had been engaged in a fight, judging from his bloody face.

This was about all, as they told it, with unimportant variations. And even they came to the conclusion that it was all time wasted for naught, thus far.

The coroner called for Charles Hampton. No one answered. The person wanted was not in the room. All eyes turned toward Old Forked-Lightning, but he made no move, gave no sign.

The coroner made a note in his book, and called John Forbes, the landlord of the Occidental Hotel.

Honest John took the stand, grave, clearly disturbed in mind, but after being sworn, by his own request, he spoke frankly and to the point.

There is no particular necessity for repeating what he said in evidence, since it has already been placed before the reader in a different form. Enough that he told a plain, direct story, concealing nothing of importance. And it was just as clear that his evidence bore with dreadful force on Fremont Metcalf.

"Wait a bit, Johnny," said Old Forked-Lightning, as the landlord was told he might go. "I want to ax you a few questions, just."

"Your honor, I object!" impulsively cried Colonel Teemer, rising to his feet. "We have lost time enough through that man, without listening to his insane vagaries any further. Besides, granting him sane, what right has he to question the witnesses?"

"The right of a honest critter what wants to see jestice done to a stranger in our city," coldly retorted the old man.

"No person, stranger or otherwise has been accused. Consequently, even though you were the legally retained counsel of the person to whom you allude, you have no right to take up the time of the court after this fashion." The objection is sustained. Take your seat and keep still, sir!"

One of the jurymen, a bright-looking young miner named Donald McLean, rose and spoke:

"Your honor, it's the truth we want to get at. If it is against the rules for the old gentleman to speak, I'll be his mouthpiece. Write your questions, sir, and I'll read them."

The colonel promptly rose.

"As that would only waste still more time, I withdraw my objection, your honor. I can stand it as long as the rest."

"That's white, ef you did say it, kunnel," declared Old Forked-Lightning, with refreshing frankness. "It ain't much I've got to ax him, an' mebbe it won't need to be said at all. Ef the judge'll give me leave to hev him called up ag'in, in case it 'comes necessary, I'll let Honest John go fer now."

The coroner bowed his assent. He wanted to do what was right, being at bottom an honest fellow, but he lacked both brain and decision. Now, however, since the colonel had receded from the position he at first assumed, he felt confident he would not antagonize his creditor by ruling thus.

The next witness called was Dr. Peter Peters. A messenger was sent for him, and he promptly appeared.

With the cool readiness and precision of one who had often filled a similar position, the worthy doctor gave in his evidence, confined at first to the examination he had made of the dead man.

The better to be understood by the non-professional men who composed the jury, he used as few technical terms as possible, pausing to make those few perfectly clear. He told how the bullet had caused death, and why. He traced its course as clearly as though he was handling a model before the jury.

According to him, Jay Flicker had never drawn a conscious breath after the bullet struck him. It had passed directly through the heart, and very near passed entirely through the body as well. It rested just beneath the skin at the back of the dead man, a little below the shoulder-blade.

"You found and extracted the bullet, then?" asked Colonel Teemer, this being his first question.

"I did. This is the bullet," replied the doctor, holding a bit of lead up between his thumb and forefinger.

The point was but slightly battered. On the sides could be seen the ridges where the force of the powder had "upset" the lead by expanding the bullet to fill the rifle.

"You have determined its caliber?"

"Only by estimating its size; 38 caliber, I judge."

All eyes were instinctively turned toward the little table in front of the coroner. On this lay several articles, each one wrapped up in paper. One of the largest of these the coroner now unwrapped, revealing a beautifully-plated revolver of the Smith & Wesson pattern, which all who gazed saw was of the size mentioned: 38 caliber, double-action.

"Witness, I believe you helped to wrap this article up. Do you recognize it?"

"If there is a letter P. scratched on the under side of the trigger guard, I recognize it as the pistol I picked up from the floor of the room, a few feet from where the dead man lay," promptly replied the doctor.

"The mark is as you state. Was it on the weapon when you first picked it up?"

"It was not. I saw the weapon, and concluded it must be the one with which the murder was committed. I marked it with my initial, the more surely to identify it. Colonel Teemer, Bruce Conley and several others were present at the time."

"Did you notice any peculiarities about the pistol?"

"One. The pistol contained one empty shell, the hammer resting upon the primer, not having been raised to the safety notch since the weapon was discharged."

The coroner held the weapon up where all could see it, then opened and took out the cylinder. A breathless silence fell over the crowd as they saw that the cylinder contained one empty shell, besides the four loaded ones.

The impression made by this exhibit could not be mistaken. Not one present, so far as faces can tell the story of the mind, doubted for a moment that this very weapon had caused the death of Jay Flicker. Even the young jurymen, who had shown some token of friendly feeling toward the man whom all believed would be accused of the killing, looked gravely and soberly toward Old Forked-Lightning.

That worthy made no sign. He stood among the spectators, silent and fixed, like some grand statue decked out in rags. Could it be that even he had given up all hope?

"To make sure there can be no mistake, witness, will you step forward and see if the bullet you cut from the body of the deceased is really

of the same caliber as the pistol in evidence?" slowly uttered the coroner.

Doctor Peters promptly advanced and took the pistol. He held it where all could see, and made the test. Allowing for the slight battering received by the bullet, it plainly fitted the weapon. With a bow, the witness laid both bullet and cylinder on the table, then resumed his former position.

As he did so, Old Forked-Lightning slowly stepped forward and cleared his throat as though about to speak. The crowd held their breath, curiously expectant. The words came:

"Doctor, kin you swear that the gun yender didn't b'long to the man what was killed?"

CHAPTER XI.

NOT DEAD, BUT LIVING.

THE witness gave a little start of surprise as this query came to his ears from the rear, and he flashed a swift glance around in search of his questioner. A half-smile momentarily curved his lips as he recognized the white-crowned figure, but as though in amends, he bowed gravely, saying:

"I could not swear to that, of course."

"Then it mought 'a' b'longed to the deceased, fer all you kin say to the contrary?" persisted Old Forked-Lightning.

Dr. Peters hesitated, not from any disinclination, to answer the question, but as the understanding by which Old Forked-Lightning was to question the witnesses if he liked, had been arrived at while the present witness was absent, he first wished to learn what the coroner had to say. Very innocent and proper in itself, but that hesitation did much to weaken the force of what had gone before with the crowd in general.

"You may answer, witness," and Whitecap nodded after his most owlish fashion.

"Yes, the weapon might have belonged to the deceased."

"Jes' so. Not long ago you spoke of these doin's as a murder. You spoke o' the gun as bein' the thing with which the murder was done. Now I ax you, as a man what gen'ally knows pritty well what he's talkin' 'bout, kin you take oath that they was a murder done in that room up-stairs to-night?"

Dr. Peters hesitated a moment before replying. Thus far a murder had been taken as a matter of course, all efforts being turned toward finding out who was the author of the crime. R-isting in that belief, the witness was conscious that he had not chosen his words with quite as much precision as he should have done, and this knowledge brought an unusual tinge of color to his face.

"One can be morally sure of a thing, without being able, or willing, to make oath to that effect," he replied, slowly.

"Which is to say you called it murder, when you couldn't sw'ar but what it was no wuss then a plain killin' or accident," pointedly suggested the veteran.

"It may have been either, of course."

"Kin you make oath it wasn't a suicide?" sharply demanded Old Forked-Lightning, stepping a little closer, bending forward and emphasizing his words with one long forefinger.

"I would not hesitate long about that."

"Why so? 'Member you're on oath a'ready!"

"Jay Flicker hadn't 'the sand' to kill himself, as any one who enjoyed his acquaintance in life will tell you, if asked."

A chorus of subdued laughter ran through the spectators, that showed the doctor he had made the precise hit he calculated upon, and for a single instant a grim smile curved his lips. Only momentarily, however; then he stood in cool and quiet waiting for any further questioning.

Insane or not, Old Forked-Lightning was sharp enough to see that by this unfortunate question he had lost all the advantage gained through previous ones, and he shifted his tactics, quite as much to wipe out the memory of that little slip as for anything he hoped to gain by it.

"Doctor, hev you any objections to tell the jury what it was the kunnel, yender, whispered into your ear, jest afore the room whar the accident come off was clared?"

"Not in the least," was the prompt reply. "Colonel Teemer reminded me that the bullet which caused the death of Jay Flicker would probably be called for at the inquest. He bade me secure it, and have it in readiness when wanted."

Not even Old Forked-Lightning could doubt the perfect truth of this answer while looking at and listening to the witness. And he began to believe he had better drop the cross-examination before he made a bad matter worse.

"You s'arched the body of the dead man, I b'lieve?"

"In part—that is, I aided in the examination."

"You found him heeled, I reckon?"

"He was armed, certainly."

"You tuck charge o' the tools?"

"No, sir; the coroner first had them marked for future identification, then wrapped up and placed with the weapon which was believed to have fired the fatal shot."

Old Forked-Lightning cast a quick glance toward the articles on the stand before the coroner. He saw that there was but one package which could contain a revolver, and that decided his next question.

"What make an' bore was the guns tuck from the body?"

"There was but one. That was a Colt's navy-size, old style, cap-and-ball."

"Men in this kentry, when they tote guns at all, gen'ally hev one to balance another. Mebbe Jay lost the other pop? I reckon that's 'bout all I wanted to ax Doc."

Dr. Peters glanced toward the coroner. That worthy looked toward Colonel Teemer. He made no sign, and the doctor was told he might step aside.

Then Colonel Teemer rose and spoke:

"Your honor, since the point of ownership in that revolver has been brought forward, perhaps it would be best to settle all doubts before going further. The deceased was a man well known in Canaan, I believe. A man of his nature must have formed acquaintances, more or less intimate and familiar with his affairs and personal belongings. If there are any such friends present, will one kindly volunteer to testify?"

"Bet your boots they jest will, kunnel!" cried Romeo Bugg as he pushed his way through the audience. "I reckon I knowed Jay like a book, an' kin give a schedule o' his outfit as would make a pawnbroker kick himself with shame—I jes' kin, boss! Whars the book ye cuss onto, jedge?"

Colonel Teemer did not look like one delighted with the witness who came forward so promptly in answer to his appeal, but he was too shrewd to object. He had given the coroner a clew to the object which he wished to gain, and resuming his seat, he left the affair in the hands of Whitecap.

"Sart'in Jay was heeled," briskly answered Romeo. "I never knowed him when he wasn't, though they is men who mought know more about hau'lin' the tools an' jes' a lee'tle quicker on the trigger. But Jay would do—git him in a corner!"

"Did you ever see him in possession of a weapon like this?" asked Whitecap, holding up the revolver found on the floor of the chamber where the dead man still lay.

"No, sir," returned Romeo, his nose in the air. "Jay was a thoroughbred, he was! Ketch him with a pop like that? A gun that you'd hev to stop an' ax a man was he hit, an' then hev to help him 'zamine his hide to find out? Not any! Jay toted navys, old style, ball-an'-cap; out o' date, mebbe, but they could shoot straight an' to kill, every clatter, jedge!"

"You saw the deceased yesterday, or later?"

"I see him this werry evenin' jedge!"

"And he was armed as usual, with the same tools?"

"Jes' hafe way, jedge. One o' his guns he put in soak with Abe Dietz, fer p'izen. He hed the mate to it on when we parted, not a hour afore he was butchered."

The coroner waved his hand in token that he had no further questions to ask, but before Romeo could leave his position, Old Forked-Lightning spoke up sharply:

"Whar was it you parted with Jay Flicker?"

The giant had been in the room all the time, and he knew that he would have to answer, but he did so with an ill grace.

"Durn ye, you know well enough!"

"It's what you know that we're tryin' to git at. You come for'ard like you was dyin' to tell what you knowed, so don't fly the track this airly. Whar was it, witness?"

"At Fatty Sexton's shebang," sullenly.

"Come to think, I b'lieve you was thar. You hed a row of some sort, didn't ye—from the looks o' your face?"

A laugh ran through the audience. Romeo Bugg glared furiously around him, but even his anger-sharpened eyes could not detect a smiling face among them all. The mirth was instantly stifled to all outward seeming.

The coroner glanced toward Colonel Teemer, then said:

"You are wasting precious time with questions which have no bearing on the case. The witness may step down."

"When I git through with him, not afore," was the sharp retort. "Keep your place Bugg, at your perch! Answer me: you hed a row yender? You got licked by a stranger? You tried to crowd him, an' he knocked you down with a glass? That stranger was the man they found in the room with Jay Flicker? Yes or no, right down on the nail?"

"He tuck me onawar's with a coward lick!"

"And you swore to get even? Just so. You kin fly away, Bugg, jest as soon as you like," placidly uttered the old man.

"One moment, please," said Colonel Teemer, rising. "You had a quarrel in a drinking and gambling saloon with the man who is known here as Fremont Metcalf, I believe?"

Romeo Bugg gave a sullen assent.

"He drew a revolver on you, I believe?"

"A couple, boss," replied the witness, the sour look vanishing from his countenance as he caught the drift of these questions.

"They were pointed at you, I understand? You are a pretty good judge of such weapons; can you swear as to the size and style of the pistols young Metcalf displayed?"

"They was so close to the eend o' my nose that I could smell the powder abind the lead, boss!" grinned the giant. "I kin take oath they was Smith & Wesson make, 38 an' double-actin'. So kin any o' the boys who was with me."

"That will do," with a soft smile as he turned toward Old Forked Lightning, adding: "unless my venerable friend has something else to ask you."

But the old man slowly shook his head. He felt that he had done his young friend more harm than good by his questions thus far. And Romeo Bugg, with a grim swagger, fell back.

One or two of the gang were called up to testify as to the weapons worn that night by the deceased. And each one of them corroborated the testimony given by Romeo Bugg, even as to the size of the pistols handled in The Grave by Metcalf.

Then the coroner called Dinorah Metcalf. Honest John stated that she was not present, but if her presence was absolutely necessary, he volunteered to go and notify her.

The coroner bowed, and the worthy landlord left the room with Old Forked-Lightning close at his heels.

"It looks mighty black in his d'rection," muttered the former, gloomily, for he had taken a strong fancy to the young couple. "Ef you're thar fri'nd, try to git him to put in a plea o' self-defense. It's all that kin save him!"

"You think he did the shootin'?"

"Who else could 'a' done it?" with widely opened eyes. "Sart'in not the lady?"

"Nuther the one nur the other. He nur yit she won't sw'ar to a lie, even to save his neck from the rope."

"It'll come to that, then, sure's fate! An' it'll kill her, jest as sart'in as it does him!"

There was time for no more speech. They reached the room before which Dave Long stood guard, and the landlord delivered to him the message of the coroner. Dave bowed soberly then rapped gently at the door.

"Who is it, an' what ye want?" demanded Betsy Forbes.

"The lady is wanted down-stairs to give her evidence," replied Dave, in his mildest tones.

"Well, she ain't goin' down-stairs, an' you orter be—"

The indignant landlady was checked by Fremont Metcalf, who unlocked the door and bade them enter.

Dave Long repeated his message, when Fremont spoke coldly, but with a resolution that could not be shaken:

"My sister goes in my company, or not at all."

"I've got nothin' to do with any only her," quietly said the marshal. "I'm workin' under orders. Them I'm bound to obey, says, fetch the lady, an' of course she's got to go. At the same time they wasn't nothin' said to me 'bout bringin' her alone. Ef you keer to foller, all right."

Without a word Dinorah took the arm of her brother and moved, from the room. Indignant Betsy followed with one hand grasping the arm of her worse half, lecturing him with more force than elegance. If he had a spark of manhood about him, he would not permit such an outrage, in his own house, too!

Proud and erect, Fremont Metcalf entered the room where the inquest was being held, and only paused when directly before the coroner. His voice was cold and clear as he spoke.

"Sir, you have commanded my sister to appear before you, to give testimony in this case. She is here, but you will not place her on the witness stand while I draw the breath of life. She knows nothing more about this sad affair than I can tell you. I am ready to tell all I know. That must satisfy you."

Without another word he turned and gently removing the clinging hand of his sister from his arm, resigned her to the care of Old Forked-Lightning.

The coroner rubbed his long, pointed chin dubiously, as he glanced toward the foreman of the jury. After a slight hesitation, the colonel rose from his seat, speaking coldly:

"As this is a sort of preliminary examination, I do not suppose it is necessary to stick closely to rules. What we want is to get at the bottom facts of the case. If this can be done without forcing the young lady to take the stand, I for one, will be heartily glad of it. Your honor, I propose the substitution of the young gentleman in the place of the witness just called."

"Kunnel, that's white!" cried Old Forked-Lightning.

It proved another unfortunate ejaculation. Cold and stern in face and voice, Colonel Teemer added:

"I am not acting in this case with the view of gaining the approbation of friend or foe. I am trying to get to the bottom facts. If this young man can make it sufficiently clear to us, on the jury, I am willing to let the young lady go without being placed on the stand. If not, she must do her duty before the law."

The hot temper of the young man flashed out.

"I have said she shall not be placed on the stand. Even you cannot think she had ought to do with the death of that unfortunate man!"

"What I think has nothing to do with the case. I, in common with these other gentlemen, have solemnly sworn to be guided wholly and solely by the evidence, by the testimony which may be brought before us. By that testimony I will be guided. If my own brother were on trial for this killing, and the evidence pointed conclusively to his guilt, I would bring in a verdict accordingly."

"Your honor," turning toward the coroner and bowing gravely, "I deeply regret having taken up so much of your time with matters which properly concern only myself; but ever since this sad affair occurred, I have been bitterly and totally without cause assailed by certain parties. I bore it as long as my manhood would permit. I have answered them, and now the matter rests, so far as I am concerned, until this jury is discharged and I am free to defend myself with other weapons than my tongue."

Colonel Teemer was very well satisfied with himself as he resumed his seat. He felt that he had, metaphorically speaking, given his enemies "a black eye." And it was not difficult to see that the majority of the audience sided with him.

After giving his name, age, residence, and so forth, Fremont Metcalf was asked by the coroner to tell what he knew about the deceased.

"Until this evening, I never met the deceased," he began, his voice cold and composed, though his face was pale as death. "I first heard of him in answer to an advertisement which I had circulated extensively in the West, asking for information regarding a certain person named Tucker Metcalf. That answer, postmarked at Canaan, directed me to come here, provided I was able and willing to pay five thousand dollars to the one who might tell me all about the man I wanted. I raised the money and came here. In the letter was a card on which was painted the pictures of a blue jay and a flicker. I was to visit the place known in Canaan as The Grave, and there wait until my correspondent revealed himself. This he was to do by pointedly calling my attention to the five-spot of clubs. In return, I was to present the painted card, when he would find means of seeing me in private."

"A very curious story," commented the coroner.

"But true, for all that," was the quiet response.

"The deceased proved to be your mysterious correspondent?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, and through no fault of my own, as any honest person who witnessed the affair can bear testimony, I became mixed in a row while waiting for the man who made the appointment. A fellow who called himself Romeo Bugg was at the head of the gang with which I had trouble. The deceased was also one of the party, though I did not recognize him as my correspondent until later in the evening. When the trouble was over and the gang gone away, the deceased returned and showed me the five-spot of clubs. I gave him the painted card; then left the saloon, returning direct to my rooms at the hotel. I told the landlord to show up any one who might call for me, supposing of course that the deceased would follow me to the hotel and seek an interview by the customary means."

"And he did not? Then how came he in your chamber?"

"How he entered the house, I know not. I was talking with my sister about the deceased, when he startled us by showing his head over the low partition, on the north side of the room!"

"When you took him for a robber and shot him?"

"No, sir," was the steady reply, and the eager audience drew a long breath, some of relief, others of disappointment; for if such had been the case, not one there but what would have felt the young man was perfectly justifiable in killing Jay Flicker. "I recognized the man, before I could use my revolver. I called to him, and then brought him in by way of the door, eager to hear what he could tell me concerning Tucker Metcalf."

"He met you amicably? There was no quarrel between you?"

"He met me amicably. There was no quarrel between us," slowly replied the witness.

"Nor afterward?" coldly asked Colonel Teemer.

"I object!" cried Old Forked-Lightning, before the witness could answer the pointed question. "It's the *then*, we're dealin' with just now—let the *afterwards* take keer o' itself ontel we git to it in reg'lar order."

"The objection is well taken. The witness will proceed."

Fremont Metcalf obeyed, first asking the jury to bear with him for a while, if at first it seemed to them as though he was wandering widely from the point in question. Without telling the story of the past, the present could not be fairly comprehended.

"The man I came to Canaan in hopes of discovering through the agency of the deceased,

was my father. He disappeared from home many years ago, when I was but a babe and my sister yet to be born. Knowing this, gentlemen of the jury, you can imagine in part how anxious I was to hear what the deceased had to reveal. With his aid, we hoped to once more have a father—if not that, at least to have the mournful satisfaction of weeping above his grave."

The voice of the witness grew less steady, and feeling this, he ceased speaking. Before these men, some of whom he felt were deadly enemies of him and his, he was too proud to unnecessarily betray his weakness.

The coroner with a view to aiding the witness in recovering his composure, unwrapped one of the smaller packages, revealing a golden locket, enameled and richly chased on the outside. This he held up, asking:

"Have you any knowledge of this locket, witness?"

"It belongs to my sister and myself," replied Fremont, his voice still husky, but growing steadier and stronger as he continued: "It contains the portraits of our parents. I took it from the chain by which it has hung around my neck for years—ever since the death of our mother. She placed it in my care, on her death-bed, saying that she prayed heaven it might some day be the means of our recognizing our father."

There was a little bustle among the audience at this speech, and a slight crowding closer, the better to view the locket. Such is idle curiosity. But a wild hope sprung up in the breast of the witness as he noticed it, and he cried:

"Even yet her earnest prayers may be answered! Your honor, may I beg of you, as a favor to one who may never have the opportunity to do what he now asks at your hands, to show the faces in that locket to all here present? There may be one who can recognize the face of Tucker Metcalf!"

Himself not a little curious, the coroner opened the locket and gazed at the faces long and earnestly. Without a word he passed the jewel over to Colonel Teemer, who held it where the light fell full upon the painting of the missing man. Not for long. Then, passing the locket on, he spoke, clear and cold:

"If that face truly represents Tucker Metcalf, he is not dead! Three weeks ago I 'grub staked' that very man!"

CHAPTER XII.

STILL ANOTHER SURPRISE.

FREMONT METCALF staggered before those coldly modulated tones as a man might stagger from a heavy blow in the face with a clinched fist. A gasping cry parted his lips, his eyes opened wildly, one hand went up to his breast as though to calm its mad pulsations.

And none the less startled and agitated, Dinorah broke from the side of Old Forked-Lightning and rushed forward, the brother and sister finding both strength and support in each other's arms.

It was an affecting scene, and even those rude, rough men of the mines felt it, while good and worthy Betsy Forbes burst out with a great blubbering:

"The good Lawd bless an' preserve 'em both! Ain't they a pictur' jest as they stan'? Ef they could on'y be tuck!"

It was the one touch that turned pathos into bathos, and a little ripple of laughter ran through the crowd, greatly to the indignation of the honest hostess, who glared around her with inflamed eyes and quivering fingers. Honest John, who knew what a tempest was brewing, sacrificed himself for the good of the company, and manfully tackling the dilemma, he bore it in his arms out of the room, then sat down before it and meekly took the entire dose.

That outburst and the laugh which followed it served to recall the startled senses of the witness, and with gasping eagerness he asked Colonel Teemer:

"Where? When? You are sure it was he—alive—well?"

"If this picture is an accurate portrait of your father, then I repeat: Tucker Metcalf is alive and well. Three weeks ago I saw him; I gave him a 'grub-stake,' and he went off, vowing to find a fortune or never more look upon my face."

There was a touch of pitying contempt in the last words that stung the children like the lash of a whip, and for one of them at least it cleared brain and unfettered tongue.

"Brother, do not listen to him!" cried Dinorah, her blue eyes glowing, her face almost transfigured; then she turned upon the foreman of the jury, her voice clear and scornful, yet full of mingled grief and regret. "Our father—alive and well? After so many long and weary years—alive, and give no sign—send no word to his waiting ones? It is false—false from beginning to end!"

Colonel Teemer bowed coldly and resumed his seat, saying as he did so:

"Then the artist who painted the picture is responsible in part. The man whom I aided when he came to me begging for bread and another chance to get even with the world, must

have lied, for when he told me his name, he swore it was Tucker Metcalf."

Fremont caught the trembling form of the girl to his bosom, his own figure drawing proudly erect, his handsome face flushing hotly, his voice strong and stern:

"You are right, sister. Our father would never keep cruel silence through all these long years. I see it now—the scales are fallen for good and all! He is dead—he died or was cruelly murdered, long years ago. That man lies—why, I can only guess—and may Heaven forgive me if I wrong you," turning impulsively toward the colonel who was listening with a cold smile curling his firm lips. "As God bears me now, I believe this story of yours but a portion of the vile plot by means of which you seek to ruin my life and bring my neck to the hangman's shameful rope!"

It was a heavy, black charge to bring, but the colonel never flinched nor quailed before it. There was a lofty contempt written on his face, and his voice was cold and measured as he replied without taking the trouble to leave his seat:

"I have naught to say to such wild and baseless charges. I am sorry, now, that I spoke of Tucker Metcalf, though I did so in answer to your own pathetic appeal, real or feigned. It is nothing to me, one way or the other, and I am willing enough to let the matter drop right where it is. Still, if ever you or your sister wishes to recall the matter in the future, I will not hang back. If nothing else, I will try to treat you as a gentleman, her as a lady."

There was a covert sting in those words which served a double purpose. It was both a blow and an appeal; a blow to the young couple, for it accused them of ungenerous treatment; an appeal to the audience, begging them to contract his magnanimity with the base ingratitude of the strangers. On the whole, Colonel Teemer was not suffering greatly from his prominence in this rather peculiar case!

Coroner Whitecap, seeing that the colonel had nothing more to say on the subject, rapped sharply on the stand before him, assuming his most owlish look of grave displeasure.

"Really, I must check this shameful waste of time! While I do not object to an occasional digression, if there can be a fair reason for such a departure from routine, this constant bickering is too much even for my patience! Witness, you will please confine yourself strictly to your story. Colonel, if any more insults are hurled at you, I will see that you are fully protected."

Fremont bowed his head and pressed his lips to those of his sister. He resigned her to the care of Old Forked-Lightning, who led her back to her former position.

Meanwhile, the locket was passing slowly from hand to hand among the jury, each one of whom took a double interest in the pictured face since listening to that spicy interchange of words. And as Fremont Metcalf once more faced the jury, to resume his evidence, Donald McLean, the young man who had offered to be the mouthpiece of Old Forked-Lightning, uttered a low exclamation as he held the locket in his hand, saying:

"I know that face! It's the picture of Dick Morley, or else that of his very moral!"

Colonel Teemer sat motionless, not a muscle of his face altering at this unexpected confirmation of his words; but in his dark eyes came a vivid light that showed he was not altogether the stoic he appeared to outward seeming.

"Remember the name, sister!" uttered Fremont, turning toward Dinorah. "Dick Morley—write it down on your heart and keep repeating it over and over until you find the man who owns that name. Then—but you know."

"Then I will expose him as a fraud, if he claims to be our long-lost father!" was the steady reply.

Again the coroner rapped on his stand. The locket was returned to him, and once more wrapped up securely. And then Fremont Metcalf resumed his story.

"Your honor, and you, gentlemen of the jury, enough has been said to show you why I was so eager to meet and converse amicably with the deceased. I believed he could tell me of my father, of whom naught had been heard for full sixteen years!

"I have told you how he came to us. I questioned him as to his reasons for acting so queerly, for taking such risks; but he only partially explained. He said that he so acted to avoid a still greater peril; that if the gang—his own words—should suspect his paying me such visit they would not only murder him, but would kill both myself and my sister. I pressed him for his reasons—tried to get him to explain what he meant more clearly, but he refused to say more."

"Which brought on a quarrel between you?"

"Not so. In my eagerness to learn what he could tell me of Tucker Metcalf, I cared but little for anything else. I more than half-believed he was exaggerating for the purpose of raising his price, and what followed only went to confirm that suspicion."

"You had offered him five thousand dollars for the information, I think you said?"

The witness bowed in assent.

"A very pretty sum, indeed! Yet the deceased asked more?"

"He did. He demanded double the amount."

"Ten thousand dollars? And you refused to pay it?"

"I was obliged to refuse. Apart from my natural reluctance to yield to such shameful extortion, it was beyond my means. I had raised the first amount only by sacrificing our entire means. We had barely sufficient to pay our way to this place. When I had paid over the five thousand dollars, we would be left without enough to settle our hotel bill."

"You paid the amount to the deceased, then?"

"No sir. He would not abate his unjust demands."

"And in resisting these unjust demands, you quarreled and came to blows over the matter?"

"We quarreled, but never came to blows," was the husky reply. "Think, gentlemen of the jury—and as Heaven hears me speak, I am telling you the simple truth! Think how much depended upon that man's confession! Remember that we believed he could tell us of our father—the father whom we loved more than all the earth beside—although one had never seen his face and the other could only recall it as a dim, shadowy dream! Knowing all this, I ask you—is it reasonable—is it even possible that I would come to blows with that man, much less kill him?"

His voice choked and he ceased to speak, his bosom heaving convulsively, his noble figure trembling like a leaf.

Cold and unsympathetic came the voice of the coroner:

"Yet you admit having quarreled with the deceased?"

"Yes; we quarreled. I am here to tell the truth, gentlemen, no matter how heavily it may bear against me in your opinion. I shall not conceal one action of mine, as Heaven hears me."

"We did quarrel. I thought to scare him from his vile position, and to do so I caught him by the throat and threatened him with my revolver. I told him to tell his story—to prove true to the agreement which we had made with each other—to rest content with the sum I was ready to pay him the moment he had completed his confession."

"And still he refused, with your pistol at his head?"

Fremont bowed, unwilling to trust his voice just then.

The coroner did not speak. His brow was wrinkled, and he seemed to have some difficulty in shaping the question which he would put next.

There was perfect silence in the room. One and all of the audience bent forward, fairly holding their breath as they waited for the result. The jurymen were scarcely less excited—save and except Colonel Teemer. Cold and impassive, he sat calmly erect, his dark eyes staring at vacancy over the head of the young man who was, really, if not technically, then on trial for his life!

"Then he—that is, you quarreled?" mumbled Whitecap.

"Only as far as I have told you," replied the witness, with a faint, weary smile. "My sister caught my hand, and begged me to give the fellow another chance. I did so, willingly enough. I would not have killed him with those words unspoken for all the world!"

"Yet he was killed!" tartly uttered the coroner, feeling as though he was being played with, his dignity mocked.

"He was killed, but not by my hand, Heaven knows! And in its own good time, Heaven will reveal the real murderer!" exclaimed the witness, casting a look upward.

Colonel Teemer slowly rose from his seat and spoke:

"Your honor, would it not be as well to place the weapon with which the killing was committed in evidence at this point? I believe the present witness has never been shown it, or asked aught regarding the article."

In this, as in any other suggestion, his rich creditor might offer, the coroner showed prompt obedience. He unwrapped the revolver, saying as he did so:

"You admit having held a deadly weapon at the head of the deceased, I believe? Will you state to the jury the exact nature of that weapon?"

"It was a revolver with five chambers, made under the Smith & Wesson patent, 38 caliber, silver plated, with checked handle of gutta-percha," steadily replied Fremont.

"Precisely. Was this the weapon, witness?" added Whitecap, as he uncovered and held up the pistol.

"You don't have to answer no such questions, lad!" impulsively cried Old Forked-Lightning, starting forward.

Fremont turned toward him with a faint smile, slightly motioning him back with one hand as he said:

"I came here prepared to tell the truth without evasion or reservation, no matter how black it might make the case appear against me. If that pistol is marked on the butt end with a

very small monogram, consisting of two letters intertwined, those letters being my initials, F. M., the weapon is mine—the same one that I held at the head of the deceased."

The coroner closely examined the pistol, saying:

"There is a mark of some sort here, but it is very small and faint. It looks like an accidental scratching—"

"But it is not. You can see the same mark on its mate," and the witness quietly advanced to the stand and placed upon it another weapon, precisely similar to the one which the coroner was examining.

Returning to his former position, he added:

"The pair were a present to me from a friend, when he learned of my intention to come West. He said I might need them," with a mournful smile. "He had the monogram placed on the weapons before he gave them to me. I would never have noticed them, the work is so minute and adroitly done, only for his calling my attention to the letters."

Old Forked-Lightning watched the jurymen while Fremont was uttering this frank and manly explanation, and a peculiar light came into his keen eyes, for he saw that the impression made was highly favorable to the witness. Surely a guilty man would not go so far out of the way to pile up damning proofs against himself!

The coroner glanced covertly toward his mentor on the jury, but evidently Colonel Teemer had no further suggestion to offer just then. Once more he was gazing at vacancy, his strong features looking like a mask of colored ice.

"You fully identify the weapon, then?" asked the coroner.

"I do. It once belonged to me. It is the same one which I held at the head of the deceased," steadily answered Fremont.

"But with no intent to shoot? Only to frighten him?"

"Only to force him to relinquish his unjust demands, and to tell the story which we had come so far to hear. My sister bade me give him one more chance, and I consented. I put up my weapon, and we talked the matter over. The deceased seemed to dread some party which he termed the gang, but he would not say of whom they consisted, nor give a clear reason why he feared their vengeance. It was this point over which we quarreled mainly at first."

"I understood you to say that it was because of his extortionate demands?" suspiciously uttered the coroner.

"It was that at which I took offense, principally," was the composed reply, "though the increase had been hinted at rather than expressed in so many words. If I gave the other impression, it was unintentionally."

Old Forked-Lightning frowned and bit his drooping mustaches, for he saw that this admission was giving the jury a disagreeable impression. Why could the honest fellow not have glossed over his slight mistake, instead of voluntarily pointing it out after this style?

"Let the witness continue," uttered the cold, even tones of the foreman. "When he has finished his story, we on the jury will try and fit the pieces together in proper order."

It was a cruel, venomous speech, and more than the witness thought so. Among them was Old Forked-Lightning, and the hot, fierce look which he flung toward the colonel spoke plainer than words—spoke of punishment to come!

"The deceased proved himself a very hard man to deal with," steadily resumed the witness. "The similarity between our names and the name of the man of whom we were so anxious to hear, gave him a suspicion of the truth, doubtless. Questions of his which I could not well decline to answer, soon made him aware of the whole truth, and this, I am confident, served to confirm him in the infamous resolve at which he had only hinted before."

"You mean his demand for double price?" asked the coroner, as the witness paused for breath, or, rather, to compose his thoughts and to guard against making any further mistakes.

"I do. But he did not make the demand immediately. He asked many questions, pretending to fear his Tucker Metcalf was not our Tucker Metcalf. To solve his doubts, I showed him the picture of the missing man, taking the locket from the chain by which it hung around my neck. He looked at it long and closely, then admitted that it was the shadow of the original as he had known him in the years gone by."

"Then he made his increased demand?"

"Yes. He gave as a reason for this, our close relationship to the missing man. As our only surviving parent, he was surely worth double price!"

"To which you objected?"

"To the price, not the inference," with a faint smile.

"And then?"

"I swore that he should tell us all, or that I would kill him. I leaped up and caught him by the throat. The stand between us was upset, and we both fell over it. The candle went out. The deceased tore loose from my hands as we fell, and as it grew dark I struggled to my

feet, only to receive a crushing blow on my head. After that, I knew nothing until the door was burst open and men rushed in, bearing a light."

"You did not fire a shot from your pistol?"

"As heaven hears me, I did not!"

"Yet your pistol was found lying on the floor, with one barrel discharged. Only one shot was fired. A man was killed. You three were alone in the room—"

"Before the light went out, I admit. But while it was dark, other men were in the room with us!"

"And of course those other men committed the murder?" uttered Colonel Teemer, with a poorly-concealed sneer.

"If murder it was, they did," was the firm reply. "If the deceased did not kill himself by accident, they killed him."

"You did not, by some miraculous providence, recognize any one among those mysterious men, witness?"

"I did not. I have told all I can tell. As God is my witness, I have uttered naught save the solemn truth!" earnestly uttered Fremont Metcalf, bowing and falling back to the side of his sister and Old Forked-Lightning.

Her hand clasped his for a moment, then she dropped it and advanced to the witness-stand, speaking quietly:

"Mr. Coroner, I wish to give a little testimony."

"If you can throw any fresh light on the subject, most assuredly you are at liberty to speak, Miss Metcalf," hurriedly replied the coroner.

"I wish to be placed under oath, if only to avoid the insulting doubts of those who, for what reason heaven and their own vile selves know! are trying to bound an innocent man to a shameful and wholly undeserved death!"

The oath was administered and subscribed to, then Dinorah spoke, every syllable clear and distinct, though her voice was low and even.

"First, I wish to solemnly swear that every word given in evidence by the last witness is true as truth itself: Of my own knowledge I swear it."

"Even to that wild story about the mysterious men who filled the room as soon as the light went out?" asked Colonel Teemer, his brows uplifting, incredulity in every line of his face, every note of his voice.

"Even to those men who so mysteriously entered the room and committed murder, the more surely to accomplish their vile ends, one of which is the murder of my brother!" was the firm, even reply.

"Indeed! Perhaps your eyes were keener than those of the last witness? You recognized the men?"

"They were keener. I did recognize one of the men. I saw the face of one man, lighted up by the glare of the pistol when he fired the shot that killed Jay Flicker!"

The resolute statement created a great stir in the room. Exclamations and words of wonder echoed from lip to lip, and it was several moments before the colonel could make his voice audible. Then he said, sharply, sneeringly:

"Of course this was before you swooned dead away?"

Dinorah made him no answer, turning to the coroner.

"Your honor, I demand your protection from insult. I have stated a fact on oath, and am ready to answer any questions which may be put to me by you or any other gentleman; but not when uttered by that brute in the shape of a man!"

"The kunnel's fortygraff, or I'm a liar!" chuckled Old Forked-Lightning in audible tones, when Whitecap cried:

"Silence, or I'll have the room cleared! Certainly, Miss Metcalf, you shall be protected. I will ask you the necessary questions. You distinctly saw this face—the face of the man who fired the pistol-shot? Is the owner of that face now present? Can you point him out to the jury?"

"I did recognize it; he is present at this moment; I will point him out to the jury—or the honest portion of it. As heaven is my witness, yonder sits the man who murdered Jay Flicker!" she cried, pointing direct at Colonel Teemer!

CHAPTER XIII.

WAITING FOR THE VERDICT.

To say that this sharp, clear, direct accusation created a sensation, is putting the case very mildly. Until the last word was uttered, not one there present even suspected Dinorah was about to point out the foreman of the jury as the murderer, unless, indeed, the colonel himself had some such idea. If he was indeed the person who had fired the fatal shot, he must have seen whether matters were drifting almost from the first word Dinorah gave after taking the oath.

But not one of the others. Not even Fremont himself had heard her breathe a suspicion of all this, and as he listened now, his face grew white as that of the murdered man lying in the chamber of death, for fear the brain of his dearly-beloved sister had been turned by the sore trials of that night. For a single instant

he even fancied that Dinorah, seeing how narrowly, how closely the toils were being wound around him, was recklessly perjuring her soul in hopes of saving him—but only for an instant.

The audience stood as though spellbound for a brief space, then cries and exclamations broke from their lips. Some cheered the beautiful witness, whose white hand was still leveled at the man whom she accused of being the midnight assassin; others booed and laughed at the idea of Colonel Darius Teemer being guilty of such an unreasonable crime. And high above other voices rose that belonging to Romeo Bugg.

"The ideo? ef the gal ain't plum looney, then she's lyin' faster'n a boss kin—"

The chief of Canaan never brought that sentence to the conclusion he had in mind when he began it. A white and fluttering shadow seemed to flash toward him, and he went up, back, and down, his fall shaking the entire building!

That shadow was Old Forked-Lightning. His fist struck the big bully under the chin and on the throat, lifting his huge bulk fairly from the floor, sending him headlong, to lie a quivering, senseless mass of bestiality.

"Drag the foul mass of carrion away, ye who call him friend!" hoarsely cried the old man, his eyes blazing like balls of fire. "Out with him, I say, or, by the living lights of Heaven! I'll tear the blaspheming tongue from his poisonous jaws and thrust it down his ulcerous throat! Take him away, ye snarling coyotes who follow the lead of a pariah cur, too utterly vile to own master or country! Out with him!"

So terrible was the rage of Old Forked-Lightning, so fiercely impressive his outburst, that not one of the gang thought of refusal or reply. Silently, tremblingly, they lifted the quivering form of their chief in their arms and bore it out of the room, feeling the scorching of those blazing orbs until the apartment and house were both left behind them.

Through it all—through the dramatic denunciation by Dinorah Metcalf—through the mingled storm for and against himself—through the promptly checked insult of the giant desperado—through the agitated stir which accompanied his removal by his "heelers"—Colonel Teemer sat, pale and composed, showing not the faintest sign of either anger or fear.

Steadily his dark eyes returned that passionate gaze, and then, as the brief tumult died away with the disappearance of the gang with their senseless leader, there came into his countenance a look that was half amazement, half pity.

The crowd saw it, and those who had been foremost in siding with the witness, began to feel ashamed of their impulsive outburst. Dinorah saw it, and hot indignation overpowered her fictitious calmness.

"I repeat it! Remembering that I stand here bound by a sacred oath—pledged on the holy word of God to say naught but the naked truth—I repeat my charge! You, villain, murdered that hapless wretch! It was your face I saw by the red glare of the weapon you wrested from the hand of my poor brother, the more surely to doom him to a shameful death! On your hand steams the heart-blood of Jay Flicker! By my solemn oath I accuse you! Before man and in the hearing of my Maker, I denounce you, Colonel Darius Teemer!"

It was too much for her overtaken brain. As she uttered the last word, her outstretched hand came convulsively back to her aching brow. A gasping moan broke from her lips as she reeled and would have fallen but for the ready aid of Old Forked-Lightning, whose movements were even quicker than those of her brother. His strong arms caught the fainting form, and as he held her firmly, his jetty eyes flashed defiance above her drooping head to the coldly smiling foreman.

"Smile, ye ice hearted bloodhound! Smile and whisper beneath your breath that one-half of your devil's work is done! But beware! There is a Heaven above us—a Heaven that will not always frown on innocence and helplessness! Sooner or later the whole truth must come out, and the guilty suffer for the terrible crime under which the wholly innocent now stagger. When that day comes, Darius Teemer, will you sit smiling as now? I doubt it!"

Swiftly, impetuously came the words, and for the moment Old Forked-Lightning seemed a prophet in his high indignation. The impression was deepened by his bare head, crowned with those long and snow-white locks, by his patriarchal beard, by the almost inspired light which filled his eyes.

But this assault, as the former one, slipped harmless off from the icy mail in which the colonel had incased himself. His smile slightly deepened, but that was all. Not a muscle of his countenance altered, his steady, moderate gaze never flickered, through it all he sat like one who is consciously innocent of all wrong-doing.

If he was not innocent, then the man was a marvelous actor, with nerves of steel, and utterly callous heart.

Old Forked-Lightning fell back a little, aided in carrying the almost swooning maiden by

Fremont Metcalf. They were about to bear her from the room, back to the chamber from which she had come at the summons of the coroner, but Dinorah resisted, faintly whispering:

"Not now—a moment, first! That man must answer my charge—my work is not yet done!"

Old Forked-Lightning saw that to argue with her while in such a condition would be cruel as useless, and at a sign from him, Fremont held his peace. Dinorah half-reclined in a chair, supported on one side by Old Forked Lightning, on the other by her brother. The crowd divided to afford them a fair view of the space immediately around and in front of the coroner and jury.

Slowly, deliberately the foreman of the jury rose in his place, bowing gravely to the coroner, then speaking, his voice calm and composed, his manner quiet and even dignified.

"Your honor, a very grave charge has been brought against me by the volunteer witness who last occupied the stand. At first I thought I would pay no attention to her wild words, believing as I did and do that her anxiety for a loved brother has temporarily shattered her mind. I say I did not think it worth while to take up your valuable time by making a defense which no one who knows me can for a moment think necessary. But there has been one foolish or audacious enough to vaguely re-echo that charge—even his impudence was not quite equal to accusing me of murder in so many words.

"Your honor, with all respect due a lady under any circumstances, I am obliged to say Miss Metcalf has made a serious mistake. If she recognized a face other than that of her brother or the deceased, by the momentary light which must have accompanied the fatal shot, it certainly was not mine. I am ready to strengthen this denial by repeating it under oath—not because I think it at all necessary, but because of my friends who may need some such weapon to fight the base insinuations of my enemies."

With a grave bow, the colonel resumed his seat. And almost before he did so, a burly man pressed through the crowd, his rugged countenance flushed and eager, saying:

"Jedge, nobody called me to putt in a word, but I reckon it's the plum-center truth you all want in a case like this. Ef so, an' I kin speak my little piece, you'll git some o' the truth, anyhow!"

"Do you know anything concerning the killing?"

"No more then what I've bearn sence I've bin in here," was the prompt reply.

"Then what are you wasting precious time for?" demanded Whitecap, the swift succession of startling surprises having thoroughly disconcerted him, muddling up his never too clear and perspicacious brain.

"Beca'se of somethin' I see at almost the very second the pistol-shot was fired, up above. I was comin'—"

"Not another word until that man is placed on his oath, bound as firmly as words and the Holy Bible can bind him to utter naught save the truth!" cried Old Forked-Lightning, impulsively. "It is for life or death, now, and no witness shall speak a lie without perjuring himself in the sight of the law as well as in the sight of heaven. Swear him first!"

The coroner glanced helplessly toward the jury. The foreman made no sign, but Donald McLean spoke instead:

"It is a good rule, your honor, and if carried out in every instance, it will remove a little of the grave weight which rests on our shoulders. As we are to decide wholly by the evidence, use every precaution to make it sincere."

"I'm ready, jedge," half-laughed the voluntary witness. "It ain't so much that I'll hev to swear to, but mebbe it'll count some in gittin' at the real facts."

He was sworn, and after the usual preliminaries, testified as follows:

"I was walkin' up the street this evenin', hev'n' bin at The Grave, whar I left pritty much all my wealth. I say this to 'plain why it come I was goin' to my bunk so airly."

"I was red-hot, but sober as a deacon, over my bad luck. I was thinkin' it all over so stiddy that I didn't see two men who stood at the corner as I turned it. I run slap up ag'in 'em afore I knowed it. That was right in front o' Abe Dietz's saloon, an' by the light which come through the open door, I saw thar faces as plain as I see yours at this minnit, jedge."

"One was a youngish feller, a stranger to me. The other—thar he sets, your honor. It was Kunnel Teemer, or I'm a parjured sinner! An' I hedn't gone a dozen steps afore I bearn the pistol-shot up in the Occidental, an' run right thar to see what fun was goin' on."

"You know the colonel, then?"

"Know him by sight an' repetition, jedge," with a grin, as he added:

"That's about the size of it. The kunnel is jest a leetle too high-toned fer to be intimit with a pore devil like me. But I know him plenty well enough to take my oath it was him I run into not a minit afore the shot was fired in the hotel. An' when it was fired, he was nigh two hundred yards from the Occidental front door."

There was perfect silence for a brief space.

The witness glanced good-humoredly around him, waiting for any further questions which might be asked him, but none came. The coroner was satisfied with what he had heard. Old Forked-Lightning knew that nothing he might say could aid his cause. Dinorah sat like one stupefied, her face like that of a corpse.

The witness fidgeted a little, then said, half-doubtfully:

"That's all I know 'bout it, jedge. An' ef you hain't got no more to ax me, would you mind jest takin' the oath off befo' I go?"

"What do you mean?" ejaculated the coroner, amazed.

"Waal, it's all right up here whar nothin' but the dead solemn truth is wanted, but it'd be a powerful beffy load fer a weak critter like me to tote sech a oath 'round with him fer the rest o' his days. I ain't a liar, to say sech, jedge," with a sheepish laugh, "but you know how 'tis when a man gits to playin' keerds an' sech—a oath to tell the truth clean from start to finish would handicap a critter most awful!"

This remarkable simplicity did more than anything else toward convincing those who listened that the witness had spoken the simple truth in his evidence. With an owlish smile the coroner "took the oath off," and the man fell back, grinning all over his face.

As he vacated the stand, Colonel Teemer again rose.

"Your honor, since the last witness has taken the trouble to speak in my behalf, wholly unsolicited by me, perhaps it is just as well that this part of the matter be disposed of at this point. If you will kindly call Walter Keever, I will remember it as a personal favor."

Dinorah started at the mention of that name, and, if possible, her face grew paler than ever. She caught her breath with a sharp gasp as a tall, neatly-dressed figure brushed past her, stepping into the open space in front.

"He here! And his witness! God pity us now, for we are indeed lost!" she gasped, convulsively grasping the arms of her supporters, her eyes wildly watching the movements of the man who appeared in answer to the call for Walter Keever.

Fremont Metcalf, too, seemed strangely affected, though his agitation looked more like rage and hatred than aught else. He made a motion, as the tall form passed by them, as though he would leap upon or strike him with clinched fist. So, at least, Old Forked-Lightning interpreted his motion, and the veteran grasped him by the arm, knowing that any wild outburst at that juncture could only render the situation more critical. But the mad impulse fled almost as quickly as it was formed, and cold and composed, Fremont Metcalf listened.

"Your honor," said Walter Keever, in a clear, yet slightly tremulous tone of voice, "unless my evidence is strictly necessary to the case, I beg of you to excuse me."

"On what grounds?"

Keever hesitated, casting a quick glance over his shoulder toward the spot where Dinorah Metcalf sat, erect, motionless, staring fixedly into his face, but looking more like a marble statue than aught of flesh and blood. A hot flush passed over his face, and his tones were lower than ever as he said:

"For no reason to make me ashamed. I have loved Miss Metcalf for years, and I would rather cut off my right hand than do or say aught to give her trouble! Colonel, as a man speaking to man, I ask you to let me off from taking the stand!"

"It is no longer a question of mere politeness," was the cold response. "We are here to discover the real assassin of a fellow-being. I have been charged with firing the shot that killed him. You can settle any doubts which may still linger in the minds of my fellow-jurymen. You must speak."

Walter Keever bowed gravely, then took the oath.

He gave his name; his occupation was that of a mine-owner and capitalist; his regular residence in Chicago.

"I remember the incident alluded to by the last witness," he said in continuation. "I was speaking with Colonel Teemer at the time. We were standing in front of a saloon, having met there while going in opposite directions, nearly half an hour before. We had not been inside the saloon. Neither of us had been drinking as I know—certainly I had not. My brain was perfectly clear and my nerves steady. I could not possibly be mistaken in the man who ran into us. I saw him on the stand just now, and fully recognized him as the same."

"I heard the report of the pistol at the Occidental Hotel. It occurred within a very short time after the man passed on; within two or three minutes, certainly. The colonel and myself were still talking before the saloon. I mentioned the shot, but he laughed; said I would grow accustomed to such sounds if I stopped long in Canaan. Then a man came running past, saying a man was killed at the hotel. The colonel went to see if he knew the victim. I did not go. I have no fancy for looking at disagreeable sights."

That was all the witness said, but it was sufficient to clear the colonel in the eyes of all,

save those of the three in whom we are more particularly interested.

Walter Kever fell back, bowing and offering his hand to Dinorah, who gazed at him for an instant in silent scorn. His face flushed painfully, and he retreated, as she arose, pale as death, but outwardly composed.

"You are triumphing now, vile assassin, but the hour of punishment will come, when you least expect it!" she said, her white forefinger pointing at the foreman of the jury, her blue eyes glowing with a prophetic fervor. "It may come too late to save the innocent, for the ways of heaven are mysterious and inscrutable, but come it will—I know it! And when it does come, may you suffer a thousandfold the torments you are heaping on the heads and hearts of those who never knowingly harmed you in word or deed!"

"Your honor," turning to the coroner, her voice moderating, sounding weary and ill, "if you have no further questions to ask us, we will go back to the room from whence your officer brought us. Have we your permission?"

Wesley Whitecap bowed, his tongue failing him. For once in his selfish, worldly life, his heart was sincerely touched.

Leaning on the arm of her brother, Dinorah slowly left the room. Still more slowly Dave Long followed after, his face that of one whose heart was far from being in the work his sworn duty compelled him to perform.

Old Forked-Lightning overtook him, tapping him on one shoulder as they ascended the stairs, saying:

"You're doin' a dog's work, Dave, but we know you hev to. All the same, make it as light as you kin onto them two pore young critters, or—"

"It don't need no crooked words or looks from you to bring that on, ole man," was the quiet, dignified response. "I hev to do my duty, make or break. But durned ef it ain't the last time! I'll throw up the office to-morrow!" he added, with an outburst as abrupt as it was genuine.

Old Forked-Lightning left him standing on guard out the door, entering himself with the brother and sister. He closed and locked the door, then advanced and took them by the hands.

"It's a black lookout, fri'nds—a mighty black lookout! But we'll keep on hopin' fer the best as long's we kin."

"We must hope!" impulsively cried Dinorah, all her false composure vanishing as she clung to the neck of her brother, kissing him passionately, mingling her tears with his. "Evil-hearted though they are, they cannot condemn the innocent to suffer in place of the guilty! I saw the face of the murderer by the light of the pistol-shot. It was the face of that demon—of Colonel Teemer!"

"My poor girl, we believe you, but no one else will," said Fremont, soothingly, gently smoothing her soft hair.

"They must; it was God's own truth!"—passionately.

"I believe lies are of more value here," he said, with a short, hard laugh. "The liars were listened to as though Gospel poured out of their mouths. Those who told the living truth were mocked at and—Bah!" with a sudden increase of desperation, "let them go on. What matter! Is life so precious that I need fight so hard to cling to it?"

It lasted only a moment, this wild fit; then, like one who mutely begged her pardon, Fremont kissed his sister again and again. She lay sobbing on his bosom, seemingly death-stricken.

Old Forked Lightning fidgeted around for a while, then he spoke, gravely and rapidly:

"I know how sore your pore hearts must be, children, but in this emergency it's better that we talk plain an' conceal nothin'. You won't take it hard ef I do some p'inted talkin'?"

Dinorah impulsively grasped his hand and pressed it to her lips, dampening it with tears. Tremblingly the old man released it, his voice strangely softened as he spoke again:

"It's mighty hard to say it right to your faces, dear ones—mighty hard! But it can't be helped. I know you're free o' killin' that dirty whelp as I be, but I ain't the jury—wuss luck!"

"You think, then, that they believe me guilty?"

"They can't help b'lievin' it, ef they go 'cordin' to the everdunce which was brung for-'ard," was the grave response. "We know that they was some almighty tall lyin' done by more than one o' the witnesses, makin' still blacker what—the blessed Lord knows—was black enough at best! But kin the jury sift out all the lies an' save on'y the truth? Ax yourself that, keepin' in mind who the head o' that jury is?"

"The man whose hand is stained, not mine."

"So we know, but we failed to prove it. That's the p'int jest now. We tried to show he done the bloody work, but the critter hed kivered up all his tracks too cunnin' fer that. He's a mighty bad man, that kunnel. He never strikes ontel he gets a good ready, an' then somethin's got to drap. This time it is you.

Why, I don't know, nur they ain't time to ax. They can't draw it out much longer; they'll be bringin' in the vardick mighty soon now; what it is, you know without my sayin'."

"Ef you stop here ontel that vardick is reached you're a dead man! Not that they kin do more in law than to hold you fer trial afore a reg'lar jedge; but thar's the lynchers!"

A convulsive cry escaped the pale lips of the maiden. Fremont turned a shade paler. Old Forked-Lightning whispered:

"Say that you'll trust to me, an' I'll save you yet! In one word—there is no time to lose!"

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE NAME OF THE LAW!

DINORAH clasped his hand between hers, a faint flush of reviving hope tinging her cheek and lending a feverish brightness to her blue eyes.

"Save him, and I will forever bless you! He is innocent—he must not stay here to be legally murdered!"

Fremont was calmer, though there was a quivering about his lips, a wistful look in his eyes as he intently gazed into the troubled orbs of Old Forked-Lightning.

"How can it be done? What must I do?" he asked, slowly.

"Thar's on'y the one way," replied the veteran, his voice sounding harsh and unnatural as his eyes carefully avoided those of the maiden who still clung to his hand. "To stop here means death. The jury kin bring in on'y the one vardick a'ter all 's bin said. That wouldn't make so much matter, ef we was whar law could take its nat'ral course; but we ain't. The kunnel's a mighty big man, an' he's down onto ye. Jay Flicker run with the gang headed by Romeo Bugg, an' they're all down onto ye. Let the vardick mention your name, an' thar's boun' to be a lynchin' bee ef your fri'nds ain't strong enough to fight the lynchers off."

"But you said you could save him!" gasped Dinorah.

"An' so I kin," slowly. "The lad's got to run fer life."

Fremont turned a shade paler, glancing toward the door.

"You forget that a guard is posted yonder!"

Old Forked-Lightning shook his head, his eyes drooping.

"Say that you'll run fer it, an' I'll go out fu'st. When the road's clear, I'll call you. Will you do it?"

Dinorah fell away from the speaker, the flush dying out of her face, a look of bewildered horror coming into her eyes. Old Forked-Lightning caught that look, and his own eyes drooped again, his face flushing hotly, his voice husky and low.

"It's the only way left. All the gold in the world wouldn't be enough to bribe Dave Long to shet his eyes when duty told him to keep 'em open. He's a mighty good boy, Dave is; but he's all alone in the world; he ain't got no sister to break a heart over him, nur yit no wife or young 'uns. Better him then you, lad! Say the word—time's creepin' on!"

"If he could utter such a word, I would disown him forever!" cried Dinorah, her eyes flashing with her old spirit.

"And I would deserve it," quickly rejoined Fremont, the momentary temptation vanishing when he knew that freedom could only be won through the death of one who was only performing his sworn duty. "I have done nothing for which I should flee in the night like a cowardly criminal. My hands are clean and my conscience clear. If die I must, it shall be like a man and a Christian."

"But it is very hard!" murmured Dinorah, her face hidden on his manly bosom.

"Hard, I know; but would it be any easier to see that honest fellow out yonder die at his post of duty? To know that blood was certainly on my soul, if not on my hands? Cheer up, sister; cheer up and be brave! We may be borrowing trouble without due cause. The verdict may be different from what we anticipate. And, after all, it is not like a regular trial. At the worst they can only arrest me on the charge of the jury."

"Right, Fremont!" cried Dinorah, rallying her proud spirit and standing side by side, as though defying their enemies. "If you are guilty, I am equally as much so. Together we have lived—together we will die, if the worst comes!"

It may sound somewhat theatrical, even bombastic, when set down in plain black and white, but Old Forked-Lightning was a good judge of human nature, and he knew that the maiden meant every syllable she uttered. A suspicious moisture came into his eyes and he turned away for a moment lest they betray how deeply he felt for them in their day of sore trial.

Only for a moment. He knew that time was precious—in a very different sense from that in which Wesley Whitecap so frequently used the sentence. He had much to do ere that dark night was spent.

"It was the one chaine, children, an' I thought it no more then right that I should place it fairly afore ye," he said, his voice re-

gaining its former cool steadiness. "Now you've put in your answer, I'll 'mit openly that ef you'd made a different choice, it would 'a' hurt me deep! But let that go."

"We'll keep on hopin' fer the best, but we'll prepar' fer the wust, all the same. Ef it ain't needed, we'll on'y be out the time spent—an' that ain't much 'longside o' etarnity."

"What can we do but wait?" muttered Fremont.

"Not much, you two; me, a heap, I hope. Anyway I'm goin' to make a mighty big try fer it; an' ef I don't make the rifle, be sure it won't be my fault."

"You'll wait here ontel the vardick is brung in. Take it as easy as you kin, keepin' in mind that it ain't like it was the say-so of a reg'lar court o' law. They'll treat ye white enough at the jump-off, anyway. You ain't notbin' to fear afore the gang, bes time to git together an' 'cuss the matter over good. An' afore then, your fri'nds 'll be around ye."

"My friends? where are they?" uttered Fremont, with a short, hard laugh.

"Here is one, dear brother!"

"An' I kin take oath to two more," as promptly replied Old Forked Lightning. "Chispa Charley ain't wastin' his time, I don't reckon, though I looked fer him to turn up afore this. You kin 'pend on o him as you kin on me, children. He's a gambler an' all that, but his heart's in the right place, an' he never yit went back onto a friend when his word was once passed."

A wam smile flitted across the face of Dinorah.

"He said nearly the same words of you, when he left us."

"Ef he said that the old man was ready an' willin' to lay down his life fer you, Miss Metcalf—an' fer you, boy—he never stretched the holy truth a ha'r's breadth!" was the impulsive reply.

"You have proven your good will, time and again, this dark and painful night," said Fremont, grasping his hand. "If we do not thank you more at length, it is not because your kindness has failed to make its due impression, believe me!"

"I do—I kin guess all you would say, an' that saves time which kin be put to better use," quickly uttered Old Forked-Lightning, all traces of emotion vanishing, leaving him once more the keen, alert man of business.

"Chispa Charley, as I said before, is a gambler, an' the sportin' men o' the town—o' the kentry, I might almost say—foller his lead like he was a king. They's good men as well as wuss amongst 'em, o' course; take 'em in a bunch an' they'll averidge as good as the citizens who sorter look down onto 'em as card sharps. Which is why Chispa has to do his pritty work a leetle onder kiver, like, so's not to range the 'better element' ag'in' him an' the cause he holds up fer—you see?"

Brother and sister nodded. Chispa Charley had previously prepared them for something of this sort, and so they were more ready of comprehension than might otherwise have been the case.

"Good enough! What I'm tryin' to git at is this: I hate to leave ye, but ef we're to do clean work, I must find out jest what Chispa is doin' an' the plans he has made, so we won't come into c'lision when the 'slosion comes off—see?"

If not, they pretended to, and once more bidding them be of good cheer, telling them to submit quietly to whatever lay in store, and trust all to the friends who were working for their salvation, Old Forked-Lightning shook their hands warmly and left the room, brushing past Dave Long without a word and hastening out of the hotel.

It seemed as though their last earthly friend had deserted them, and Dinorah, her forced composure giving way, bowed her head on Fremont's bosom, sobbing as though her heart was breaking.

Perhaps it was all for the best. It gave him something to think about, to keep his mind from brooding morbidly over the bitter complications which had so suddenly and completely entangled his thread of life. It was his turn to play the part of comforter and adviser.

"Dinorah, dear girl," he breathed softly, his cheek resting against her head as she concealed her face in his bosom, "we must make the most of the little time we have left us. Nay," and he could not wholly help from laughing as his sister gave a convulsive start and agitated quiver at his words, "I did not mean that, sis. I have faith to believe that you and I will live for each other these many and many long years to come."

"Heaven in its mercy grant it!" was the tremulous reply, and with an effort that was as noble as it was severe, Dinorah lifted her head and checked her tears, vainly trying to answer that smile with another. "But he said—I cannot help thinking of those frightful lynchings!"

"He means well, but he exaggerated, no doubt unwittingly," quickly replied Fremont. "The day is past for that sort of thing, in a civilized country."

Dinorah made no reply, but the troubled light in her eyes deepened rather than died away as her busy brain recalled the many wild tragedies

with which the papers of the day literally teem. And the more she thought, the more impressive seemed the warning words which fell from the white-bearded lips of The Solitary.

"It is disgustingly annoying, and all that," added Fremont, his naturally hopeful spirit beginning to lift beneath the heavy burden so unexpectedly cast upon it, "but after all we know that it can be no more than a passing cloud. I am innocent of crime or wrong-doing, and even strangers cannot be brought to think different when they are given time for looking at both sides and weighing the evidence. I will not think so badly of my fellow-beings as all that comes to!"

"But he said so—and he surely understands these wild, uncouth men better than either you or I, brother!"

"I know. He believed all he said, too; but still I hold to my belief. Heaven knows that is bad enough!" with a short, hard laugh.

Dinorah yielded, more to love than reason. Yet she could not refrain from uttering:

"Only a cloud; but it is so dark, so threatening!"

"The sunshine will seem all the brighter, when the cloud passes away. But while it lasts, Dinorah, there is work for you to do. You remember what that arch-villain said? You remember the name he mentioned?"

"Dick Morley, he said. But—brother—you do not believe him? It surely is not *our father*?" faltered Dinorah, her eyes filling with a sorely troubled light, her lips quivering, her poor brain in a whirl.

"I do not know what to think," replied Fremont, his face clouding. "When he spoke, it seemed to set my blood on fire. I knew that it could not be our father—alive and well, all these weary years without sending one word home to mother. And yet—it may be so! He may have written that triumphant letter too soon. He may have failed when he felt success was fully assured. A thousand things may have happened to rob him of the wealth he had accumulated, and his proud heart may have forbidden him to follow that letter, in poverty, with empty hands."

"Coming from any other lips, I would never have doubted its truth; but from *him*—from the wretch who seems to be bent on ruining us, whose every word and action has pointed to that bitter black end—I do not know *what* to think!" murmured Dinorah, shivering.

"Nor I," admitted Fremont. "But another recognized the portrait and called the name. It may be true. At least, it is a chance to learn the truth of what that unfortunate man must have held in reserve. He surely must have meant this Dick Morley, when he wrote to us!"

"But if so well known in these parts—if living all these long years in the mines—would he not, if our father, have seen some of our advertisements? Surely he must! And as surely he must have answered them!"

"He may never have seen them. His spirit may have been too completely broken—or, seeing them, he may have resolved to keep silent until he had won the fortune he once promised to bring to his family. You know the colonel said he gave him a 'grub stake.' That means fitting him out with tools and provisions for a prospecting campaign, the proceeds of any discovery to be divided."

"Supposing the worst to come—supposing the jury bring in a verdict of murder, against me—I will be arrested and taken to prison for trial. If so, I can do nothing; but *you*—sister, you must hunt up this Dick Morley and forever set our doubts at rest! You will do it, sister?"

Dinorah tried to reply, but sobs choked her utterance. For the time being all her proud courage was gone. In her soul she knew that her brother was innocent of this terrible crime, but the idea of his being taken to prison to answer for the death of Jay Flicker, crushed her heart as with a mailed hand.

"You must be brave, sister; brave and true to yourself," added Fremont, kissing her pallid brow. "You must do the work that would have been mine to do, but for this unfortunate affair. You will have two good and true friends to aid you. Though both were perfect strangers until to-night, it seems as though I had known them for a lifetime. Trust them as you would trust me. Tell them your hopes and fears, and either Chispa Charley or Old Forked-Lightning will take the harder details off your hands. Aided by them, you will surely find this Dick Morley. After that, your own true heart and quick wit must guide you."

Much more he said, but it is not necessary to copy it here. And he was still talking when there came the heavy tramping of feet upon the stairs, drawing near to the room in which they sat.

Dinorah turned pale as death, clinging to the neck of her brother, as though fearing to lose him forever. Fremont also showed agitation, but less acutely. They both knew that the crisis had come, and in its darkest, blackest abap!

And they were right. The footsteps ceased just without the door, and after a brief whispering, there came a heavy rap at the door.

Dinorah trembled like a leaf, but Fremont gently, firmly removed her clinging arms and put her away. He strode to the door, unlocking and throwing it open, stepping back a few paces to admit the knocker, Dave Long, city marshal.

His face was grave and hard-set, an 'almost dogged look in his honest eyes that told how little he relished this phase of his duty.

Holding the door open, he stood to one side until the party of men entered the room. At their head marched Wesley Whitecap, more owl-like if possible than when he occupied the seat of justice down-stairs. After him filed the jury, some of their faces stolid, heavy, showing no more regret or anxiety than if carved out of wood; some trembled, that of Donald McLean most of all.

And Colonel Darius Teemer? If he felt either remorse or exultation, his face never betrayed him. It was calm and unreadable; the face of a man who felt he had performed a duty which he owed to society, but who was neither glad nor sorry the task was completed.

With a side glance toward his rich creditor, as though in hopes he might even yet be relieved of a disagreeable duty, the coroner drew a slip of paper from his pocket, clearing his voice with a hacking cough, and reading the few words written on the slip without preface or comment.

It was the finding of the jury. Their decision was that Jay Flicker had come to his death by a pistol-shot, said shot having been discharged by Fremont Metcalf. And as foreman, the name of Colonel Teemer came first on the list of names appended.

Though no more than they had taught themselves to expect, this blow fell none the less crushingly. Fremont bowed his head, heart-sick. Dinorah gave a gasping sob, then clung convulsively to the neck of her brother.

"It is a very unpleasant duty," hemmed the coroner, carefully folding up the slip of paper, taking off and wiping his spectacles, as he nodded to the marshal. "A most disagreeable duty—but it is duty, and cannot be avoided. Marshal, you have the warrant, I believe?"

"Yes—wuss luck!" was the half-sullen, half-fierce reply; but nevertheless Dave Long was not one to shirk his duty when it lay plainly before him, and striding forward he gently touched Fremont Metcalf on the arm, saying:

"You'll hev to go 'long with me, I reckon, Mr. Metcalf."

The young man lifted his eyes with a start, muttering mechanically:

"Where to?"

"The lock-up, ontel we kin git funder orders from the jedge. As the crowner said, it's mighty hard ef it is duty, an' as a man like yourself, boss, I hope you won't make it any harder by holdin' back, like."

"I will go with you quietly, and try not to confound the office with the man. Dinorah, you remember?"

With a sobbing cry, she flung the loose hair back from her white, tear-stained face, her eyes suddenly blazing.

"Remember! Can I forget! Forget that you are innocent of this horrible crime! That they have sworn your dear life away with false testimony! Ay!" her eyes fairly ablaze as she turned upon Colonel Teemer, one quivering hand uplifted. "You have covered your soul with perjury a thousand miles deep to swear away the life of an innocent man—of one who never did you harm or injury! Why, oh, why did you do it? What end have you to gain by stealing his life? What—ha!" with an exclamation that was almost a shriek as she caught sight of a tall, neatly dressed figure standing just without the door. "I see it now! You, Walter Keever, are at the bottom of all this frightful trouble! You swore to make me sorry, and this is your revenge! Coward! Liar! Assassin!"

Like bullets came the epithets, and for an instant the man addressed shrunk from before the storm. But then he recovered his composure, outwardly, at least, and entered the room bowing, with an apologetic smile as he said:

"I was compelled to utter those words, Miss Metcalf."

He said no more, for Dinorah no longer noticed him, but once more clung around the neck of her brother.

"Where you go, I go too, darling! If you are guilty, I am no less so! They shall never separate us on earth or in heaven, brother! When they bring the shameful rope, it shall encircle my throat before it touches yours!"

In vain Fremont tried to reason with her. In vain he whispered again the sacred charge which he had given her just before the coming of the officers of the law. She could not, she would not understand him. She clung to him in a frenzy of grief and fear—clung to him so desperately that he vainly tried to release her nervous arms, ceasing at length through fear of doing her material injury.

Dave Long drew back a little, hitting his mustaches and muttering savage curses on his office and the law in general. Wesley Whitecap turned his back and used his handanna freely, coughing, hawking and hemming at a furious

rate. Walter Keever interchanged a covert glance with Colonel Teemer, but did not venture to do anything more important.

That calm, unreadable countenance seemed to grow harder, and a brighter light to shine from those black eyes as they roved swiftly from one to another of the company. Then he spoke, sharp and stern:

"Marshal, you know your duty; perform it!"

Dave Long turned toward him with a sullen respect.

"The warrant says to arrest Fremont Metcalf: it don't hold the name o' no lady. I won't lay the weight of a finger on her, ef the law goes to 'tarnal smash—so thar!"

"Then I will!" harshly muttered the colonel, striding forward.

But before his hand could touch her person, Dinorah faced him, a beautiful fury, scorn and hatred filling her face and ringing in every syllable.

"Will nothing short of playing the hangman satisfy you, merciless demon? Have you not wrought enough injury to the strangers who came here on a holy mission?"

"The law must take its course," was the cold retort.

"The law? As exemplified by *you*? You—the midnight assassin! You—whose merciless hand shot down that poor wretch in the dark, and then, to save your own worthless neck, added basest perjury to murder? And now you come to gloat over your foul work! But—die, you fiend from Hades!"

Insane with trouble and wretchedness, Dinorah left her brother, drew a revolver and leveled it at the heart of Colonel Teemer. And only for Walter Keever, who caught her hand and threw it up, she would have killed him then and there.

The weapon was discharged, but the bullet spent its force on the ceiling, and as Dinorah saw Dave Long step forward and grasp Fremont Metcalf by the arm, she uttered a wild, wailing shriek, then reeled and fell to the floor, in a deathlike swoon.

And Colonel Darius Teemer smiled like one fully satisfied.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE'S MUSIC IN THE AIR.

For a moment Walter Keever stood like one petrified with horror and remorse for what he had wrought in part. Then the mad, unreasoning love which he felt for this peerless maiden burst out into a fierce cry as he sprang forward and stooped to raise her limp form from the floor to which she had fallen.

But his hands had scarcely touched her garments when a tall figure leaped into the room, grasped him by the shoulder, and whirling him around with as much apparent ease as though he was nothing more than a child, hurled him with savage force away from the maiden's side. Reeling, staggering, sightless, Walter Keever plunged heavily against Colonel Teemer, driving him against the wall, both going down to the floor in a heap before either could recover his balance.

"Hands off, you scoundrel!" grated a stern voice, and the first object the two discomfited men distinctly recognized as they unangled themselves, was a polished pistol-barrel over which gleamed the dark orbs of Chispa Charley.

Hardly comprehending it as yet, the two men regained their feet, and Walter Keever was moving toward Dinorah once more, when the prince of gamblers halted him with:

"Back, you whelp! Dare but to touch this lady with the tip of your finger, and I'll send you to your master hot-foot! And the same to you, Colonel Darius Teemer! You know me, and you know my record!"

Chispa Charley held the almost lifeless form of Dinorah Metcalf across his left arm, her head resting against his shoulder, while his right hand crossed over and covered the two confused, mortified men with a ready revolver. Incumbered though he was, he held the drop, and they were wise enough to realize this uncomfortable fact.

Fremont Metcalf had started forward to assist his sister when she made that inane attack on Colonel Teemer, but as the firm grip of Dave Long closed upon his arm and he felt that he was indeed a prisoner in the name of the law, his strength and spirit both seemed to desert him for the time being. It seemed to him as though he had not a friend left on earth or in heaven, his unscrupulous enemies triumphing at all points.

But now a flash of his old spirit returned, and he cried:

"Good boy, Charley! Wing the devils, if they so much as insult her by word, touch or look!"

Wesley Whitecap almost broke his neck in getting out of the room, the majority of the jurymen emulating his highly prudent example without stopping to argue the point. Right well they knew that bullets were no respecters of persons, and it was not often that such harsh terms passed between men of the day without the interchange of leaden compliments also.

This occasion was one of the exceptions that go to prove the rule, however. Neither of the trio were anxious to burn powder at that stage of the game, where innocent persons might easily get the worst of it.

Colonel Teemer, after that brief hesitation, caught Walter Keever by the arm and led him from the room, pausing at the threshold to cast back over his shoulder:

"I'll see you later, Mr. Hampton."

"You'll be right welcome, never fear!" was the tart response, that pistol steadily following them until their forms were fairly lost to view.

"I ask one favor of you, marshal," said Fremont Metcalf, in a tone of voice that seemed more like his usual self.

"Ef it don't run chuck-up ag'inst the law an' my duty, it's yourn afore you do the axin'," was the prompt response.

"My sister—she is all alone in the world now! Let me see her in the care of a friend before I go with you. Poor child! this has been a bitter black night for her. She is about worn out, body and mind."

"Git out, John! I guess I know—poor child!" and Betsy Forbes broke into the room, unceremoniously taking Dinorah from the strong arms that seemed—or was it idle fancy?—reluctant to give her up. "Git out, you men critters! Ain't ye satisfied with the wicked work you've done a'ready?"

Fremont glanced into the eyes of Dave Long, who released his grasp. The youth hastened to the honest if slightly-vixenish landlady, assisting her in placing Dinorah on the bed.

"As you are a woman, be kind to her," he muttered, his eyes and voice both filled with tears. "She has no mother, no father—and now they are taking me away from her. Watch over and guard her, as you hope for salvation hereafter. Kind Heaven will reward you, if we are not able to do so."

"The poor darlin'—as if I axed it! Be I a heathen without heart or bowels or sympatheticals, I'd like to know?"

"Forgive me; I hardly know what I am saying. But you will—you will guard her against all annoyance from those infernal scoundrels, Teemer and Keever?"

"Won't I?" with a significant crooking of her bony fingers. "Jest let 'em try it on, that's all! Not a man-critter shall come anighst the pritty darlin', unless she axes fer 'em in so many words—no, they sha'n't!"

Fremont Metcalf knew that he could expect no more, and stooping, he pressed an ardent kiss upon the pale, senseless face of his sister, then returned to Dave Long, saying simply:

"I'm ready to go with you now, marshal."

"It's the last bit o' duty the durned ole town'll ever git out o' Dave Long, you hear me talk!" muttered the disgusted official, with a regretful glance toward the lifeless figure over which Aunt Betsy was bending solicitously. "Fer two cents, I'd tear off the cussed star an' trample it onder fut this blessed minnit!"

"Not yet, Dave," said Chispa Charley, a grave interest in his tones. "We may need your official influence before the night is fairly over, as well as your good right arm."

"You think, then?" muttered the marshal, with a significant glance toward his prisoner.

"Speak out plain, Dave. He's got sand enough to bear the worst. Yes; I believe the gang Jay Flicker trained with is bent on raising a mob to lynch our friend."

"They'll find more snags than one in the way."

"True; I've been at work outside, as well as they. You can count on all of the boys to stand by you. I reckon we can make it mighty interesting for the roughs if they try to crowd us to the wall."

Fremont said nothing, though a sad, wan smile played about his lips for a moment. Just then, life had very little to recommend it, in his sight. Only for Dinorah—

They passed out of the hotel, the prisoner walking between them. Dave Long halted, his right hand going down to a pistol as his keen eyes detected a number of shadowy figures flitting to and fro before them.

"They're our friends, Dave," muttered Chispa, at the same time giving vent to a peculiar whistle.

An answer came like an echo, and the figures became stationary until the three men were in their midst, when they closed ranks and marched steadily through the town to the rude jail.

Dave Long's face relaxed a little as he scanned the escort thus supplied by the forethought of Chispa Charley. He knew them all, could give the record of each man in the close ranks, and was well content. If gamblers, sports, men who lived by the exercise of their wits and preying on the weaker and more credulous of their race, he knew they were men who could fight well against odds, if the necessity ever arose.

"No lynch law 'tis deal, Dave, old fellow!" laughed Chispa Charley, as they reached the jail.

It was a rude and not over-strong structure, a single story in height, covering a space some twenty feet square. This building, formed principally of heavy, rough slabs, stood at one

end of a yard formed of heavy planks, fifteen feet high, stoutly braced, the top armed with spikes and barbed wire.

As a general thing, Canaan found all of her criminal cases effectually disposed of before the lock of the jail could be turned on the delinquents, and as none of those who had been confined therein had ever broken jail, being for the most part drunken miners or gamblers put there to sleep off their bad whisky, no move had ever been made toward furnishing a better and securer jail.

Dave Long opened the door, and Fremont Metcalf entered. The marshal lit a dingy lantern and hung it up against the wall. By this light, Fremont glanced around him and made a note of his surroundings.

Not very cheering, truly!

There was no furniture in the building. A scattered heap of hay partially covered the floor, but sufficient was left bare to show him it was made of long, heavy planks. High up in the walls were cut narrow apertures which served to admit air and light when the sun shone, or which might be utilized as loop-holes against a mob, in case of necessity.

"It's the best we kin do fer ye," said Dave, his voice showing plainly enough that his sympathy, as a man, was with the young fellow. "Here's hopin' you won't need to stop here many days; an' when the time comes to leave it, may you come out, head up an' tail a-risin', to see me turn off the dirty whelp as raaly done the murder—amen!"

It was not often that honest Dave suffered his feelings to so wholly carry himself away, and when he had spluttered out these well-meant words, he hastily left the jail, closing the door and turning the key in the lock.

Chispa Charley was awaiting his reappearance.

"There's music in the air, old fellow!"

He did not need to explain his meaning. From the main part of town, nearly a quarter of a mile distant from where the jail stood in its isolation, came wild yells and cries, now and then punctuated, as it were, by a revolver-shot. Clearly Canaan was red-hot and about to boil over!

"They must take me, fu'st!" grimly uttered the marshal, looking to his weapons.

"And me!" chimed in Chispa Charley, adding: "It will be a bad old job for those who play the first cards, mate! I've got the boys in harness, and when they do cut loose, there'll be solid work for sexton and undertaker, sure!"

"How many can you count on?"

"Twenty—but they're each one equal to a couple, when they know they're fighting for the law. With you and I at the head, to tell them to go it for all they're worth, it will take a young army to best them."

"Call them up, so a feller kin make sure which is which. It won't be no hurt to them to hev it knowed they were ready to putt their licks in on the right side, even ef that should come out to be all sound an' no fury over yonder."

Chispa Charley cheerfully obeyed, and the men gathered around the front of the jail, ranged in line, Dave Long passing from one to another, recognizing each by name, adding a few words that told how fully he recognized the service they were ready to perform.

This done, the marshal returned to where Chispa stood.

"They're a good lot, sure enough, Chispa. I ain't sure but what with you to help me lead 'em, I could take the town, with Kunnel Teemer at the head."

"I think if you were to look close enough, pard, you'd find my mark somewhere on that same colonel," was the quiet reply; but it was a quietness that speaks louder than boasting. "I've had that suspicion before this, but since the part he has played to-night I could almost take oath to that effect."

"Waal, when you claim your property, I want to be whar-I kin see the fun—as plain Dave Long, without any durned marshal business 'bout it, mind ye!"

The outcry in town grew louder and more distinct, and for a few moments it seemed as though the crisis was actually at hand. It seemed as though the mob, mad with liquor and athirst for blood, were coming at a rush for the jail. But only for a brief space did this delusion last. The sounds sunk lower, and the dark group around the prison knew that the time was not just yet.

"Dave," said Chispa Charley gravely, after a brief silence which grew oppressive, "suppose you take your pick of the boys to help you, then run young Metcalf over to Tinker's Dam? I'll stay here and hold the gang level until you are safe."

Dave Long gave a short, hard laugh as he replied:

"Wouldn't that be jumpin' out o' the skillet into the fire, mate? Who rules the roost at Tinker's Dam?"

"Colonel Darius Teemer," was the slow response.

"Waal? He hain't got no grudge ag'inst the lad, hes he?"

"Perhaps I could make him forget it. Perhaps I could even persuade him to give up his residence at Tinker's Dam, and settle down in Canaan."

Words simple enough in themselves, but Dave Long readily understood the grim significance which lay beneath.

"It won't do, Chispa. The kunnel ain't a common man in the 'pinion o' the citizens' round here. Ef you was to pick a quarrel an' wipe him out, it'd be all day with you. An' so much the wuss fer the lad, too. Don't you see?"

One of the gamblers, uttering a sharp challenge, just then saved Chispa Charley the necessity of a reply to this query.

As the two leaders of the law and order party turned in that direction a man whom Chispa recognized came up hastily.

"The gang's at work, boss! Romeo Bugg and his outfit's working them all up to fever-pitch. They'll be down after the prisoner before daylight comes, sure!"

"If so, all that come won't go back on their own legs!" grimly uttered Chispa, turning to Dave Long. "If you don't like to adopt the plan I mentioned, we'd better make all arrangements for receiving our hot-blooded friends from town."

"We're ready as it is, I take it."

"If they come in front, yes; but suppose they try to make a break from the rear? Suppose they were to get inside the stockade before we knew it? Which foot would the shoe pinch then? It could be done, you know."

"With cool wits, mebbe, but not with a cargo o' bad whisky aboard," retorted Dave Long. "Still, it can't do no hurt to make all double-sure. You boss the boys; ax fer a couple o' volunteers to keep watch on the back end o' the pen."

Chispa Charley did so, and from the number that offered, he selected two in whom he felt he could place implicit reliance, and led them around to the rear of the lot. He stationed one at each corner of the stockade, bidding them keep so they could each command a view of one side, as well as the rear. Warning them to strict silence and unremitting vigilance, he left them at their posts and returned to the front of the jail where Dave Long was awaiting him.

Scarcely had he returned when another challenge went out from the men whom they had cast a little in advance to detect the approach of any body of men. In the dim light, they could detect a considerable force, and each man grasped his weapons tighter, steeling his nerves for the deadly conflict which one and all felt assured was close at hand.

Chispa Charley, revolver in hand, stepped forward to investigate, and as his sharp challenge rung forth it was answered by a voice which he instantly recognized as that of a merchant who he knew could have naught in common with the drunken rioters.

"Friends, come to lend you a helping hand in case of need," was the reply to the challenge.

"There's trouble brewing in town among the roughs. They're filling up with whisky, and swearing to have a lynching-picnic before the sun rises."

"We expected something of the sort, and have prepared for the picnickers," lightly replied Chispa Charley, advancing and warmly greeting the unexpected accession to their forces. "You are very welcome, however, though I'm afraid when the hot-heads come to see our numbers, they'll think twice before opening the ball. If that will save us some trouble, it will also save a number of lives that should have found an end long ago!"

The new-comers were for the most part composed of respectable business men of the town, and they received the gambler rather chillily. Though the lines are never strictly drawn in places like Canaan, there is always more or less prejudice against those who gamble for a living, and knowing this, Dave Long came forward and took the lead.

A quiet smile curled the red lips of the gambler, as he fell back. It was plain he cared little for the opinions of these men. If a gambler by profession, he was not ashamed of the fact.

There was little said. The men were all armed, all resolved to defeat the bloody plans of the drunken gang; but as though they were oil and water, the two divisions refused to mix. And thus, divided among themselves, they waited and watched, listening to the wild, drunken shouts from town.

An hour or more passed, without anything more definite from the roughs, and the party of defenders were beginning to believe that, after all, their precautions were needless, when they plainly heard the sounds coming nearer. And then they caught sight of a number of torches and lanterns dancing about between them and the main part of the town.

"Steady, gents," muttered Dave Long, cool as ice himself. "Let the critters make themselves cl'arly in the wrong afore givin' it to 'em. Wait ontel I give the word; then wade in fer all you're wuth!"

Though they yelled and whooped and screeched as though trying to split their throats, the

gang of roughs still kept at a safe distance. They seemed very busy about something, but just what that something was, the defenders of the jail could not guess. And as the minutes passed on, Chispa Charley suggested his stealing forward to investigate.

Dave Long, to whom, as chief of the forces, this request was directed, hesitated. He did not want to take a step outside of his legitimate duty, but his curiosity was rapidly getting the better of him, when a diversion occurred.

A flickering light was slowly approaching their position from the direction of the town. It seemed to be a common miner's lamp, the red blaze flickering and swaying in the breeze.

Beneath this light, they could dimly distinguish a human shape, though neither features nor dress could be clearly distinguished at first. Then—

"It is a woman, by thunder!" cried Dave Long, in high excitement. "What're the p'izen imps up to now?"

"It may be some cunning trick to throw us off our guard; so look out, while I take a little stroll!" muttered Chispa Charley, his revolver drawn and ready as he stepped from the ranks and rapidly advanced toward the nondescript figure.

CHAPTER XVI.

WORSE AND WORSE, AND MORE OF IT.

PLUCKY as he had time and again proven himself since the day when he first struck the region in which lay Canaan, Chispa Charley felt anything but comfortable as he slowly advanced to meet that strange "contrivance" which had awakened the curiosity of the jail-defenders.

The dim, uncertain light from the lamp which the object, man or woman, wore on its head, did very little toward solving the mystery. There was certainly some sort of floating drapery below the middle of the "what is it?" that resembled the dress of a woman.

But would a woman be in such company, at that uncomfortable hour? And, above all, would a woman be performing such ridiculous antics and contortions, unless indeed she had very recently escaped from some lunatic asylum?

Throwing forward his revolver, Chispa Charley cried:

"Halt! hands up, whoever you are!"

A hoarse, mumbling, indistinct sound came from the direction of the light-bearer at this sharp challenge, and there certainly was no further advance, though that was the only portion of the command obeyed.

The nondescript stopped abruptly, then fell back a pace or two, bending and twisting, swaying from side to side as if trying to dodge from an anticipated bullet or two. And as he stared in amazement, Chispa Charley fancied he could see the strange being desperately tugging at a revolver which had, in some manner, become entangled in his clothes behind his waist.

"Careful, you! rung out his voice in grim warning. "I've got the drop, and it'll take a prettier-looking object than you to spoil my record! Once more—hands up!"

A groaning outburst from the light-bearer told plainly enough that this warning was both heard and understood, but still those insane antics continued, while the hands remained hidden from sight behind the being's back! Was the creature courting death?

Chispa Charley cast a keen, comprehensive glance around him, feeling sure this was but some desperate trick on the part of the lynch-gang. He could barely distinguish phantom-like figures of men moving to and fro between him and the lights in the town, but none of them seemed to be within easy striking distance. And in all other directions the coast appeared to be perfectly clear.

Satisfied that he had only one enemy to deal with, and fancying he heard a low laugh coming from among the jail-defenders, the Man With a Record strode swiftly toward the writhing enigma, ready to send a bullet searching for its vitals at the first gleam of a weapon.

A gentle, eddying current of air struck the light and turned it so that the red rays fell full upon the face of its bearer. One moment was all it lasted, but that was sufficient for the gambler. A cry of amazement escaped his lips, for he not only recognized the face, but he saw why his sharp challenge had not been answered intelligibly.

The light-bearer was none other than Honest John Forbes, landlord of the Occidental Hotel, and his never very nimble tongue was now rendered absolutely dumb by the application of a close-fitting gag.

The instant he made this recognition, Chispa Charley leaped forward and knocked the miner's lamp far away, so that its rays could not endanger either the landlord or himself, then used his knife so adroitly that a gasping, wheezing breath, a guttural curse and a mutilated prayer all leaped out from the throat of Honest John in a confused jumble!

And his liberated hands came around to close on those of his deliverer, pressing them spas-

modically, while the wildly protruding eyes cast glances over his shoulder toward town.

"The good Lord bless you, Chispa!" he managed to ejaculate. "An' cuss them devils! Ef I ain't white-headed, it's a blessed marcy too good to even think of! Them abind, pushin' me on—you ahead, with the drop, a-yellin' to up with my han's—an' me thar as couldn't, all the time lookin' fer a hull mule-load o' bullets from your battery! The—good—Lord! Ef I can't git even onto somebody, bu'st goes my b'iler, an' I know it!"

Though he felt a certain degree of uneasiness and no little anxiety to learn just what this comical masquerade meant, Chispa Charley could not help laughing at the truly remarkable appearance which the worthy landlord made just then. And with a generous desire to share the treat with his fellow-defenders, Chispa was gently urging Honest John back to the jail, the landlord too thoroughly excited as yet to realize the anything but dignified figure he cut.

A chorus of laughter greeted him, as the defenders gathered around, the better to take in his truly unique get-up.

For a moment Honest John glared indignantly at them, evidently taking this wild outburst as a personal insult, but as Dave Long thoughtfully turned the full light of a bull's-eye lantern upon him, he uttered a scorching oath; then a sheepish laugh as he began tearing off his disguise.

His portly form was arrayed in a calico dress of large figure and flaming colors. On his head was a bonnet once the height of fashion and then styled a "sky-scraper," the peaked front of which was filled with gaudy red poppies and bright yellow goldenrod, with a liberal supply of green for foliage. Wide red, yellow and purple striped ribbons held the bonnet on his head, being tied in a huge double bow beneath his fat chin. A gayly colored shawl was over his shoulders, crossing in front, then being brought back and tied behind his back.

"Clearly a spy, taken within our lines and in disguise," said one of the merchants, with mock gravity.

"The penalty of which is death!" added another.

"By hanging!" supplemented a third.

And once more the chorus of laughter went up from throats that already ached from laughing so long and heartily.

But Chispa Charley suddenly grew sober. Certainly Honest John had not entered willingly on this masquerade!

"Did I? Do I look like a durned idjit?" indignantly puffed the landlord, as he hurled the last of poor Betsy's finery far from him into the gloom. "Would a sober man o' my age an' 'sperience cut up sech durned fool capers ef he didn't hev to? The—good—Lord!"

With a silent signal to Dave Long, Chispa Charley drew the landlord to one side, where he would not be pestered by the laughing comments of the defenders, then questioned him.

"Who rigged you up after that style? Where did they find you? What does it all mean, anyhow?"

And then, as the full force of the strange affair struck him, he grasped Honest John by the arm, and grated:

"The gang—they came to the hotel?"

"They jest did!"

Chispa Charley did not wait for the landlord to say anything further. With thoughts only for Dinorah Metcalf, whom he believed in imminent peril, he darted back to the front of the jail and calling a half-dozen of his men by name, bade them follow him as fast as possible. At a swift run he set off in the direction of the hotel, caring nothing for the perils which might lie in his path.

Dave Long understood what this meant, and only his stern sense of duty kept him from following. But he knew that he had work to perform where he was, and quietly called the staring landlord back to his story.

"Tell it your own way, Uncle Johnny," he said, "but 'member that the quicker I know all that's happened, the better able I may be to help you git even with the pesky critters as made a monkey-show o' you at your time o' life."

A more potent argument could not have been brought forward, for since he had recovered from his fright, Honest John was literally "red hot" against the authors of this outrage.

"Jest put me in the way o' gittin' even, an' you kin hev free run o' my house, an' never pay a durned cent as long's I live!" he exclaimed, grasping the hand of the marshal and shaking it vigorously.

"Never mind that; what I want is to know what brung you here in sech a style? Who sent ye? Fer why?"

With a desperate effort Honest John calmed his outraged sensibilities sufficiently to tell a connected story.

"I was settin' thar in the office, waitin' fer news. The old lady was up-stairs lookin' after the young lady. I wanted powerfully bad to run out an' see what you all was doin', but I didn't dast to leave the house alone while them crazy critters was rampagin' all over town. I

didn't know but what they mought take it into thar fool heads to sot the hotel afire, 'cause one o' the gang got rubbed out in thar."

"That's all right, Uncle Johnny," said Dave, with a trace of impatient sharpness in his tones. "You done jest right, but skip the outcrop-pin's an' git down to pay rock as soon's ye kin without too much trouble. Business, ye know, uncle!"

"An' thar I was a-settin' when the durned whelps run in onto me—an' me nigh two-halves asleep! They hed me foul afore I could wink twice."

"Who was they?"

"You tell—I'll never do it! They hed thar faces all kivered over with rags, an' thar duds was put on wrong side out, an' all sech-like doin's. Ef they ever hed a mother, an' she was to've see'd 'em then as I see'd 'em, she'd 'a' gone into highstrikes without hafe tryin'!"

"What did they do fu'st?" asked Dave, still thinking to hurry the landlord to the pith of his adventure.

"Wiped the floor up with me, when I tried to git loose! Spread me over that room from A to Izzard! Used me fer a scrub-broom, durn 'em!"

"An' then what did they do? What was it they wanted o' you, anyway? What fer did they send you out here?"

"It'd be a heap easier to say what they didn't do!" the irate landlord replied. "They tuck free run o' the bar, fer one thing. They made a monkey-show o' me, fer 'nother. They tied me up like a durned hog, an' then some o' the gang went rummagin' round ontel they run afoul o' the old lady."

"They didn't hurt the other—Miss Metcalf?"

"Not a hurt, thanks to the old lady. She shet an' locked the door onto 'em, an' swore she'd let daylight through the just one as dared to show his ugly mug in them quarters!"

"Good for Aunt Betsy!" exclaimed Dave Long, his eyes aglow.

"They told her they'd roast me alive ef she didn't open up, but she told 'em to go ahead; she hed more vallible property to look out fer then any ole, good-fer-nothin' man!" a little ruefully added Honest John.

Dave Long turned his face aside to hide a smile. That was Aunt Betsy, all over!

"They let her be, then. They found some o' her riggin', though, an' come back to me. They putt it on somehow, then sot me onto my feet an' marched me out-doors, like a durned monkey-show on two laigs! The—good—Lord! Ef I ever ketch 'em!"

"I'll help you to ketch 'em, Uncle Johnny, ef you'll only come to the pint at once," impatiently uttered the marshal.

"They tuck me out to whar we could see the jail. One big critter spoke to me jest so: 'You go over yender, sez he, an' tell them critters that ef they'll give up that feller as killed Jay Flicker, fer us to do as we like with, an' no powder-burnin' or knife-play, an' they kin go thar own way, peaceable. That's jest what he sez fer me to tell.'"

"Mighty gineros!" sarcastically muttered Dave. "They didn't ax nothin' by way o' boot, did they?"

"The big critter said they hed men enough, an' mad enough to take the hull town. They wanted the man that killed Jay Flicker, an' they was boun' fer to hev him. Ef quietly, all right an' so much the better. Ef not—ef you was durned fool enough to hold out—they'd turn the town, house by house. Ef that didn't fetch you out o' your hole, then they'd come down onto ye like a cyclone an' mop the hull airth with what was left o' your karkidges. Hev him they was boun' to!"

"Anythin' more?" quietly asked the marshal.

"You was to hev jest one hour to think it over. Ef you didn't come to time then, you'd see the red rooster begin to show hisself, an' hear him crow fer judgment day!"

"You couldn't take oath to the big critter, could ye?"

"Nor to any o' the rest. They was rigged out so the Old Boy hisself wouldn't 'a' knowed 'em! Wuss than me, ef that could be," and Honest John laughed faintly as he thought of the ridiculous figure he had cut, and of all the drinks it would cost him before hearing the last of that masquerade.

Dave Long had turned on his heel and went back to where his men were curiously awaiting the result. In terse sentences he explained all that he had drawn from the landlord.

"It's my 'pinion thar threats ain't got no bottom to 'em. They won't burn a single house, when they come to see that we don't skeer wuth a cent. Still, I ain't axin' any o' ye to stop here with me, ef you think you kin do more good in town. Them as wants to do it, kin pull out, an' never a word be throwed up to 'em fer doin' of it. We won't want so many men here to do the fightin', ef fightin' they is to be, anyhow."

A few of the men whose interests in the town were the greatest, availed themselves of this permission, none the less readily because the wild racket suddenly increased in town. Hoots and screams, mixed with reckless firing, made it seem as though the mob was try-

ing to work their courage up to the attacking point.

"They's too much sound thar fer much damage," dryly commented Dave Long, as he saw his men busying themselves with their weapons, as though anticipating an immediate assault. "It won't come j-st yit, if ever. They're none too good, but I reckon they hain't got no more sand than the law 'lows. When they do come, ef they mean business, you won't hear quite so much yo'ltin' as that."

He turned to Honest John Forbes, adding:

"You'd best go back home, Uncle Johnny. We're strong enough here without your help, an' you kin be of more use thar to look after the wimmen. Shet up your bouse, an' keep your finger on the trigger. Ef anybody tries to make a row, salivate 'em the best you know how. I'll be your security."

"They won't ketch me in the same way ag'in, I tell ye!"

"Not much. They won't try. Chispa's thar. Tell him to stop thar, ef he thinks best. We kin git along without him, I reckon. Batter take a circumbendibus, Uncle Johnny, so them dirty whelps won't sight ye. Good luck go with ye!"

The landlord hastened away, and almost immediately after, an approaching figure was observed and challenged by one of the keen-eyed defenders. In answer came the well known voice of Chispa Charley, alone.

"All's well at the hotel, as yet," he hastily explained to the marshal. "For fear of trouble, though, I left the boys there on guard. We can manage without them here, I reckon."

Dave Long hastily made known the story told by Honest John, and looked his wish for advice. It came promptly enough:

"They'll never dare burn the town. That much is all wind. But they will give us a trush, I actually believe. I took a little turn through the town coming back, and they seem to be getting all ready for a rush. Wouldn't it be better if we go inside the pen? Then, if they are too hefty for us, we can enter the jug through the back door, and defy an army from there, so long as they don't use fire to rout us out."

Dave nodded. He himself had come to the same conclusion.

"It won't be so long to wait," he said, with a glance at the sky toward the east. "Daylight'll come in an hour."

He unlocked the door and entered the jail, but uttered a little cry as he saw that the light which he had left with the prisoner was no longer burning. Instantly he uncovered his bull's-eye lantern and swept the light around the room. A fierce curse escaped his lips, for the jail was empty, save for himself and Chispa Charley!

For a moment he stood as though turned to stone, but then he turned savagely upon the gambler, his eyes blazing, his face contorted, his voice grating through his clenched teeth:

"Is this your work, Chispa? Ef it is, I'll kill you!"

But his light flashed upon a face that showed only astonishment and vacant wonder. Then the gambler spoke:

"I never did it, Dave; I pledge you my word of honor!"

"He couldn't 'a' come out by the front way. He couldn't 'a' done the work without help. He couldn't 'a' passed out at the back without the men thar 'sein' of him, unless they shet thar eyes on purpose. An' them men was picked out by you to keep watch, Chispa!" he said, hardly, sternly, still doubting.

"And I'll answer for them with my life, if need be!" was the impulsive reply. "Out and look for them, boys!"

He made a move as though he would set the example, but a heavy hand checked him and he looked square into the blazing orbs belonging to the marshal of Canaan.

"With me, Chispa, ef you please. We'll wait here till the boys come back with the guards."

Chispa shrugged his shoulders in silence, though his face was still deeply troubled. Nor did that strange look vanish when the men came back, the two guards between them, alive and well, but limping. And the wondering look grew still deeper as they told their story in answer to the questionings of Long.

They had strictly obeyed orders in regard to the enemy. At the moment when those in front were investigating the appearance of Honest John in disguise, they were approached by a small squad of men, whom they halted. In answer a well known form drew near, alone. They were told that he had brought some men to aid in the defense of the jail. And then—they were attacked from behind, blankets being cast over their heads. They were bound, hand and foot, as found by the party sent out to investigate; but they could tell no more.

And the man whom they accused of this treachery, was none other than Old Forked-Lightning!

"Your pard an' stan'-by, Chispa!" sternly commented Long.

"I don't understand!" muttered the gambler, passing one hand across his brows, as though to clear away the mists. "I know it couldn't be

the old man—he wouldn't take such a step without first consulting me!"

"See here, Chispa. The man who was placed in my kear as an officer o' the law, is gone. Your fri'nd hoped him off. Your men let him pass by without givin' warnin' to us. I'm goin' after that boy, an' I'll fetch him back, dead or alive! I'll look fer the old man, too, an' git the truth out o' him. Then, ef he says you was in cahoots, I'll come back here an' kill you, sure as they's a Heaven over our heads!"

CHAPTER XVII.

STABBED IN THE BACK!

As the door of heavy timbers closed behind the form of Dave Long—as he heard the sharp click of the key turning in the wards of the of the huge padlock—Fremont Metcalf felt as though the last link connecting him with this world was cut off for good and all.

He could distinguish, though indistinctly, the wild yells and hoots of the drunken mob, and as by instinct he knew what they portended; but he gave them not a second thought. Just then he felt so utterly miserable that it seemed as though he could welcome even such a shameful death as a happy release from his present misery.

He sunk down upon the musty heap of dried grass, bowing his face upon his hands, thinking—thinking.

How long he remained thus he never knew. He was lost to all outer sounds, unconscious of the lapse of time, until he distinctly felt the board on which his feet were resting, move as though being lifted by something beneath it!

It was a wild fancy, he told himself, but for all that, in his bosom sprung up a still wilder longing for freedom, for liberty, if only that he might solve this cruel mystery in whose clinging coils he so suddenly found himself! Nor did the shrill squeaking of a rat as it pressed upward through a hole in the flooring that was barely large enough to permit its passage, dissipate his waking dreams.

And then—his breath came more quickly as he heard a key turning softly in the rear door. His eyes began to glitter with a half insane light. His limbs drew together until he crouched like one in readiness to leap upon another who alone kept him from liberty. For one instant, Fremont Metcalf was but little better than a lunatic.

He could barely distinguish the cautious movements at the rear door. He heard the padlock removed, the chain lowered, the rusty hasp moved from the heavy staple. Why all this caution? Surely it would not be used if those beyond the door were of the marshal's party? And if not, then they must be enemies—perhaps the lynchers, come to take by cunning what they feared to attempt by force!

It was a cruel revulsion of feeling, and in the new fear which assailed him, Fremont Metcalf was on the point of calling aloud to Dave Long or Chispa Charley, when the door silently opened sufficiently for a human head and pair of shoulders to be thrust inside. And a whisper came hurriedly:

"Hist! not a whimper, or we're both gone suckers!"

It was well the warning came so quickly, for in that one brief glimpse Fremont Metcalf recognized the strange man who had risked life in his behalf, who had shown so much anxiety for his safety during the trial—Old Forked-Lightning!

With one finger pressed upon his lips, the old man slipped inside the jail, moving silently across the room to where the lantern stood, hastily extinguishing it. Then, so silently that Fremont never heard his approach, he regained the side of the astonished prisoner, bending over and whispering hurriedly:

"They ain't no time to lose, lad, ef you want to see the sun rise ag'in! In a little bit the gang'll be here, red-hot fer blood, an' it ain't no common jolt as'll throw 'em off the track when they once takes it. Come with me—quick!"

Despite his recent dreams, now that the way seemed opened to him, Fremont hesitated. It seemed the part of a guilty man to take to flight. And yet—if the lynchers came, no matter how the fight might go, there would be bloodshed on his account.

"Think o' your sister—think o' your fri'nds, dear boy, ef you hain't no thought fer yerself!" whispered Old Forked-Lightning. "Think o' the kunnel an' your inmates! Will you stop here to be butchered, an' let 'em bev full swing? Or will you live to clear yerself an' kiver them with shame? Will you go down in the mem'ry o' all time as a murderer, or will you take life enough to bring the real 'assin to light?"

It was enough. With feverish impatience to be gone, Fremont arose and followed the lead of The Solitary. Stopping only long enough to close and lock the door again, the old man led the way along in the deep shade cast by the armed fence, and near one end of the pen he gently pushed aside a couple of the wide planks, loose

at the bottoms, though still held to the upper beam by a nail or two.

"Go on," muttered Old Forked-Lightning as Fremont hesitated. "They're fri'nds you see waitin' thar—go on!"

He obeyed, slipping through the opening, immediately followed by the Solitary.

Fremont gave a little start as he fancied he could distinguish a prostrate figure lying close against the bottom of the fence; but his guide uttered a faint whistle and several men crept toward them, coming from that direction; and Fremont fancied one of these was the shape he first saw.

He could see that all of the men were disguised, wearing heavy mufflers over their heads and shoulders, something like meal-sacks. As he turned toward his rescuer, he saw that Old Forked-Lightning also had donned one of these disguises.

"It'll save trouble ef anybody should run on to us, ye see, dear boy," whispered the old man, taking a similar disguise from one of his assistants and preparing it for the use of the escaped prisoner. "Ef we was recognized, it mought make trouble fer Ch—fer them as stan' in with us, ye see!"

It was sufficient. The partial mention of the name of Chispa Charley drove all doubts from the mind of the young man, and he quietly submitted to be covered with the sack. It was furnished with holes through which he could see, and so he followed the noiseless lead of Old Forked-Lightning without much difficulty. Through the gloom—by a winding course that carried them from the jail and the town as well—on for half a mile or more; then they came to a little clump of trees in which a number of horses were stationed, under charge of a man who wore the same disguise as themselves.

"It's all well! They hain't bin nobody sneak-in' round?" hurriedly asked the old man.

"Not a soul that I could make out," was the reply.

"Good enough! Straddle the critters, an' pull out! Then let 'em smell fer the trail as keen as they kear fer! Ef they ketch us now, they'r heap smarter then I take 'em fer!"

Like one in a dream, Fremont mounted the beast assigned him, and surrounded by the masked men, he rode rapidly along, he knew not whither. For hours, it seemed to him. For miles and miles, he knew. Whither, he asked not, he hardly cared. It was sufficient for the present that he was leaving the terrible noose of the lynchers far behind him!

The day was dawning when Old Forked-Lightning gave the signal for coming to a halt. Nimble he leaped from the saddle and came to the side of the man whom he had stolen from jail.

"I reckon we've gone fur enough fer this time," he said, with a light laugh as he held out a hand to assist Fremont.

"Where are we?" asked the young man, as he dismounted, casting a curious glance around him over the wild and romantic landscape, whose features were gradually growing more distinct as the rosy light of the new-born day fell athwart them.

"At the end o' our ja'nt, fer the present," laughed the old man. "They's a surprise waitin' fer ye, dear boy, ef ye kin on'y guess it. Chispa wasn't idle while the ole man's lin at work. Guess what he's done. Guess who it is that's waitin' to see ye! Guess who it is—"

"My sister—Dinorah!" almost gasped the youth.

"Hit it fu'st time!" chuckled The Solitary. "Chispa brung her here while I was lookin' out fer you. You two kin keep in hidin' while Chispa an' me smell out the real truth o' how Jay Flicker come by his death. An' then you—"

"Where is she? Where is Dinorah?" interrupted Fremont.

"Look yender whar my finger p'int. Don't you see her?"

Fremont bent eagerly forward and then—a cruel blow fell upon his head, and with a gasping, gurgling cry, he fell forward upon his face, senseless!

When he recovered his consciousness, it was late in the afternoon. He was lying under the shade of a bending bush, and the scenery about him was wholly strange to his aching, throbbing brain.

Where was he? What had happened? How—ah! The truth in part flashed upon him as he strove to leap to his feet. They were bound at the ankles. There were thongs pressing his wrists. And that dull pain in his head. He remembered the cruel blow that deprived him of sense. Free then—a prisoner now! The enemy had followed and surprised them, and—

A startled cry escaped his lips as a well-known face came and bent over him—the face of Old Forked-Lightning!

"Well, you've come back to your senses at last, have you?" demanded the old man, with a strange harshness in his tones. "I began to think you meant to sleep away the whole week?"

Fremont stared blankly into that face. The voice seemed the same, yet it was strange—strange because it was heartless, sneering, un-

sympathetic! And why was he bound, while Old Forked-Lightning was left at liberty?

"It puzzles you, does it?" laughed The Solitary, coolly taking a seat beside the young man, producing a cigar and lighting it. "Well, you can console yourself with the reflection that you have plenty of company—that you are not the first by many a score, who has been taken in and done for by yours truly!"

An inkling of the truth began to penetrate the dazed brain of the young man. Instead of a friend, this strange being was an enemy! He had been playing a cunning part all through the past night! But for what reason? What could he hope to gain from such bitter, black treachery?

As before, the old man seemed gifted with the power to read the secret workings of Fremont's brain, and he said:

"I'll tell you, my dear boy, if you'll have patience. It may help to reconcile you to what is in store."

"In the first place, I'm what straight-laced fellows like yourself, might call a colossal fraud. True, I'm Old Forked-Lightning at times—when there's any important end to be gained by taking all that trouble. At others—but wait a bit; possibly you may not take any interest in that part of my record."

"False—a traitor—you!" muttered Fremont; then, as the full force of that devilish admission flashed upon him, a groan of bitter anguish burst from his lips. "My sister! may Heaven guard and protect her now!"

"She'll not suffer from lack of protectors, dear boy—don't let that thought trouble you," chuckled the old man, his eyes glowing with an evil light. "If not one, then another. If not Chispa Charley, then me. If not me, perhaps the gallant colonel—or Walter Keever—who knows?"

With a desperate effort, Fremont Metcalf strove to burst his bonds and leap at the throat of the wretch who had so thoroughly deceived him, who so bitterly mocked him now that he lay helpless at his mercy. But in vain, though he fancied he heard the stout thongs crack and snap. Then, utterly exhausted, he lay panting, glaring at that merciless face.

"Are you through, dear boy?" mocked the traitor. "If not, I'll wait. I'm in no hurry. We have to wait here until the fair Dinorah puts in an appearance, anyway."

Fremont closed his eyes with a feeble groan of mental and bodily pain. It was too much! It was too bitter!

For a few minutes Old Forked-Lightning smoked on in silence, watching the pale face of his victim through his half-closed eyes, evidently enjoying his acute anguish. But this quiet torture did not satisfy him long. He sat up and restlessly stirred the motionless figure with one foot, saying:

"Wake up, dear boy! Wake up and listen to the tale I have to unfold for your particular benefit. It is interesting enough to keep you from falling asleep, never fear!"

Scarcely conscious of his actions, Fremont obeyed, so far as opening his eyes went. With a lack-luster gaze he stared at the traitor, saying nothing, but still listening.

"Why have I taken so much pains to throw dust in your eyes? Why have I pretended to be a friend, while all the time I was an enemy? Listen and you shall know, dear boy!"

"I have had an eye on you for a long time. I was first attracted by your advertisements asking information concerning Tucker Metcalf. Why? Because I knew the man long ago. Let that answer suffice for the present. I may say more, after."

"A friend and ally of mine—never mind his name for the present—was watching you closely. He heard that you had gained a clew, and were about to act on it. He could not tell me more, just then, but he said you were getting ready to leave for the West. He could only tell me the name of the place you were heading for: Canaan. He did not know who it was you were going to meet. He only knew that you received a letter offering to tell you all about Tucker Metcalf, for a generous consideration, and that you had closed with the offer."

"The report was a vague one, but it was sufficient to mark you for death! From the moment you turned your face toward Canaan, you were doomed, beyond all earthly hope! Every channel of escape was blocked. You would have perished by the way, only it was necessary to discover the traitor who offered to sell out those whom he had sacredly vowed to serve, aid and protect with his life, if need be."

"You arrived at Canaan. You lost no time in seeking for the traitor. But promptly as you moved, the destroyer was on your track. It was accident that led Romeo Bugg to assail you in The Grave. He was acting under my orders. He was not to pick a quarrel with and kill you, in such a fashion that no serious charge of murder could be brought against him."

"Why didn't I let the game go on, to the end? Because Bugg was too fast. Because he partially misunderstood my orders. He was to wait until the traitor had made himself known to you, and to us at the same time. Then you both were to die!"

"You know how it turned out. I had to step in, and Romeo Bugg suffered for his stupidity. That plan was foiled, but I had another in reserve. I knew that you would not complete the negotiation in a saloon. I felt sure you would bid your correspondent visit you in your room. You did—and had an audience you never suspected!"

"It was you—you killed him!" gasped Fremont, hoarsely.

"You forget the verdict of the coroner's jury, my dear boy!" with a soft, purring laugh. "You committed the bloody deed, and it is so recorded! Never mind; the rope may yet be cheated of its just dues, if—wait a bit."

"How did we manage the job? Very easily and simply, thanks to the manner in which the Occidental was built. We entered at the rear of the building. We crept from one room to another, by means of the low partitions. And some of us were in hiding when you returned to your room. Two of us were hidden under the bed in the very room where Jay Flicker stole so cautiously, to reconnoiter before placing himself in your power! It was a mighty close call, but Providence smiles on the bold and deserving, you see!"

"He did not discover us, but we spotted him. If you had been a moment later in recognizing the traitor, he would never have met you, alive! As it was, we had to take longer risks."

"Your hot temper came to our aid, just as though we had laid out a line for you to follow. And when you grappled with Jay Flicker, we put out the light, leaped over the partition and took a hand in. No matter who was with me. No matter how the trick was done, or whose hand worked the trigger. Enough that we silenced Jay Flicker, stunned you, frightened the angel out of her senses, then beat a retreat over the partition, just in time to escape Chispa Charley and Honest John."

"The rest was comparatively easy. Everything pointed at you as the murderer. Old Whitecap was under our thumb, and dared not say his soul was his own. The colonel was on the jury; and he had two good backers in the same panel. I was your pretended friend. And I greatly fear that, instead of aiding your cause, my unfortunate questions but served to deepen the convictions of the jury that you were guilty!"

"Why do you tell me all this, now it is too late?"

"To show you what a poor fool you were to enter the lists without first learning the probable strength of your antagonist," was the ready reply. "We score crime on you, hoping you would be lynched. In that, Dave Long foiled us, and I had to try another plan. It was in readiness, for when I saw that the marshal would make a fight of it, aided by Chispa Charley and his gamblers, I sent out true men to open a way into the jail. One of them managed to get this key. Another loosened the boards at the back of the pen. And then I had the gang send Honest John to hold the attention of the guard in front, while we captured the two men on guard at the rear. That done—you know the rest; all but the prime motive which guided me."

"I brought you here. The two guards will swear that your friend, Old Forked-Lightning, set you free. Your flight will be taken as positive proof of your guilt. And when, to-morrow, my allies take you back to town, having captured you after a hot chase and desperate fight, the gang will set up the cry for blood. You will be taken and lynched without having a chance to utter a word of explanation. To make sure of this, you will be securely gagged. Then—"

His further speech was cut short by a call from one of the men who were stationed at a little distance, and rising, Old Forked-Lightning strode hastily away, leaving his victim to his own bitter reflections.

They were too bitter for endurance. Not only as regarded himself, but Fremont feared the worst for his sister, left unguarded and alone in the midst of such remorseless enemies.

The thought set him fairly wild, and with every ounce of strength cast into the effort, he strove to burst his bonds.

A terrible struggle—a fight that seemed to rack his frame from top to toe—then the thongs about his wrists parted! He bit his lips until they bled to keep back the cry of fierce triumph that rose in his throat. He took a penknife from his pocket and slashed away the ropes around his ankles.

He staggered to his feet, glaring around him, half insane. He heard a sharp yell of alarm, and felt rather than saw his guards dashing toward him. He darted away at headlong speed, knowing that to be overtaken meant death, since he had no weapons with which to fight for life.

He heard the sharp cracking of pistols, and knew that the bullets were whistling past his ears, but he stopped not. He darted around a point in the hill, crashing madly through the bushes, having no time to pick his way. And then—the earth seemed to give way beneath him, and he fell down—down—it seemed for miles! One wild scream—then silence!

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT'S A WISE CHILD THAT KNOWS ITS OWN FATHER.

Of all who were more intimately concerned in the strange and complicated events of that black night in Canaan, Dinorah Metcalf plainly suffered the most acutely. From almost the first, it had been one terrible, killing struggle on her part, and when the climax came, little wonder that she succumbed.

She knew not when her brother was taken away to jail. She knew nothing of the hot defiance which Chispa Charley flung into the teeth of Walter Keever and Colonel Teemer. She knew nothing more until the night was long gone, and honest Betsy Forbes was almost dead with holding the secret she at once poured into the ears of the maiden.

And when she heard that Fremont had escaped from prison, aided, it was rumored, by Old Forked-Lightning, and with her head pillowed on the fat and comfortable shoulder of Betsy Forbes, Dinorah cried herself asleep once more. But this time it was a clear, dreamless, healthful sleep that was better than food or medicine to the overtaken nerves and wasted strength.

That sleep was still upon her when the shades of another evening deepened into night, and Betsy Forbes was just coming down from a stealthy tour of inspection, when she was waylaid by Honest John.

"Is she woke up yet, Betsy?"

"No, she ain't woke up, an' ef you dare so much as whisper out loud, you'll wish you hedn't—that's all!"

Honest John cringed a little sheepishly. In the fullness of his rage he had told the wife of his bosom all about his thrilling adventure in the hands of the disguised gang, and Betsy was sore to the heart about her sadly misused finery.

"I won't—but they's two gents to see her, an' I—"

"What two? Who be they an' what do they want?"

Without waiting for John to answer, Betsy swung into the office to use her own eyes, and there found Walter Keever, accompanied by a man past middle-age. At a glance she summed him up as a no-er-do-weel, whose moral backbone had proven too weak to successfully battle with a perverse fortune.

"We wish to see Miss Metcalf," said Keever, bowing.

"Then, want 'll be your master, I reckon?"

"That is not for you to say," retorted Keever, his voice sharp and stern. "When Miss Metcalf sends me that answer of her own free will, I will accept it. You will oblige me by taking this card to her at once."

Unconsciously awed by his haughty tone, Betsy took the bit of pasteboard, running her eyes over the few words which were written with a pencil below the printed name. She gave a little cry, and glanced eagerly at the man with Keever.

"Her pap! I want to know! Alive an' well? If I ever!"

How much longer she would have continued in this strain, can only be surmised, had not Walter Keever stirred her up again with a few sharp words. And still staring at the man whom she seemed to regard as having risen from the grave, good Betsy hastened to carry the wonderful tidings to Dinorah.

She found the maiden awake, and eagerly poured her wonderful tidings into her ears. Dinorah shrunk away, trembled a little, locking far from overjoyed, those haunting doubts which had found birth in that terrible hour before the coroner's jury returning with redoubled force.

If not a vile impostor, how much better? Would a man of heart and honor suffer all these years to pass without making one effort to communicate with his wife? If Tucker Metcalf could do that, would it not have been far better to let the ashes of the past lie without raking them over? Yes, a hundred times over—yes!

Her eye flashed, her lips parted to declare that she would not see the gentlemen; but then the eager, delighted face of Betsy Forbes made her pause and consider. What would she think? What would the world think? And instead, she resolved to have it over, once for all.

"I will come down as soon as I have dressed. Bid them wait for me," she said, slowly, mechanically.

Betsy delivered the message, then hastened back to lend her assistance to the fair, young guest who had crept so wholly into her heart and good graces. And together they descended the stairs and entered the "parlor."

Walter Keever rose, bowing, smiling, but Dinorah wholly ignored him and his extended hand, her great blue eyes riveted upon the face of the man who claimed to be Tucker Metcalf.

Her face grew a shade paler as she noticed a striking resemblance there to the picture she had studied so often and lovingly. Older, feebler it seemed; gray and lined; pinched and peaked; the face of one who had found the battle of life anything but a holiday; but still

with a remarkable similarity of shape, of feature, whether taken singly or together.

"Miss Metcalf," said Walter Keever, taking the hand of his companion and stepping a little nearer as though he would unite it with hers; "this is the gentleman who has been known in these parts as Richard Morley, but whose real name is Tucker Metcalf. What! not a word—not a hand for your father?" he cried, in surprise, as Dinorah started back, placing both of her hands behind her, slowly shaking her head.

"Is he my father?" she asked, her voice seeming cold and hard. "I have met so many evil men of late, that I must be cautious and count every step I take. Tucker Metcalf disappeared sixteen long years ago. For nineteen years he never showed his face to his wife, his son. He went away before I was born, and now I am a woman grown. Is it strange that I cannot recognize him at once?"

With a meek, dejected tone, that still contained a trace of anger, the man who laid claim to the name of Tucker Metcalf freed his hand and turned toward the door, muttering:

"I told you how it would be! I did not want to come. I knew she would deny me—and rightly, too! I was an idiot to let you rake over the old ashes—ashes cold for years—and persuade me that there was a spark still alive!"

Dinorah caught the import of these muttered sentences, and for the first time her heart began to beat rapidly, her pulse to flutter, her suspicions to fade away and grow weak.

Would an impostor be so readily frightened off? Would he turn away like this, without making a single effort to hold his own? Would he not rather press his claims the more vigorously?

"Wait," she uttered, impulsively signing Walter Keever to stop his retreating companion. "You are as hasty as I am deliberate. You forget that I never saw my father. That for all these years he has been as one dead to me."

"And so it should have been to the end," was the moody reply, as the man suffered himself to be turned back, sinking heavily into his seat. "It was a black mistake in the beginning; but once begun, there should have been no turning back. Even now, it would be better to let me go as I came—Dick Morley, the ne'er-do-weel!"

"Not until you have told your story," said Walter Keever with sudden decision. "Miss Metcalf will bear you out, then she can decide whether the subject had better be dropped where it is, or the truth of your tale fully investigated."

"That will be best, I think," simply added Dinorah.

"With this understanding, then," said the stranger. "Let it be as though we never heard of each other before this very evening. Try to believe it is a perfect stranger who is repeating his life-history. And when it is finished, we can part as we met—strangers. After, you can decide what is best to do. Not one word of mine shall be given to influence you."

He spoke with a simple dignity that strongly impressed Dinorah. Surely an impostor would not take such a course!

She dared not trust her voice, just then, and simply bowed in token of acceptance. And then, in low, emotionless tones, the man who decided to remain Dick Morley began his story:

"Never mind where I came from. Never mind who I left behind me, other than that they were my family; that is sufficiently explicit for our purpose just now."

"I wanted more money. I was not content to live on a poor man where I once had riches to spare. I could not content myself with piling up dollar on dollar, one by one. I resolved to gain a fortune at a single stroke—or fail by the wayside and never rise again of my own free will."

"I never told my family all this; I left them to think I would return all the same, a rich man or a poor one. I knew my wife would never consent to a parting, else."

"That was nearly a score years ago. The Pike's Peak fever had settled into a steady epidemic. Men were making fortunes in a day. The whole world heard of them. Of those who failed—of those who wore out their lives, who broke their hearts in the desperate race for wealth—nobody ever heard. They fell, and others with the same wild hopes took their places, one to succeed, a thousand to fail miserably!"

"If ever mortal deserved fortune in those early years, I did. Day and night I wooed her. I never turned aside from the goal I first selected. I paused for none of the low pleasures which ruin so many men at the mines. I never drank, never gambled—those who knew me called me the parson."

"But fortune ever mocked me. Time and time again it seemed as though my fortune was made. As often there came disappointment, through no fault of mine. The claim that opened richer than those which had made millionaires of their owners, ran out almost as soon as men began to say I had struck it at last. Twice

I sold claims for a mere pittance, because I was starving and I had no credit—a man would not credit his own brother with a dollar's worth of flour or bacon then!—only to see them turn out bonanzas!

"Fate was against me, you see. Perhaps because I had set out to conquer her by main force of will, I often think."

"In this manner the years passed by. Then I made enough by days' labor to fit myself out with tools, provisions and a pack-mule. I struck out deeper into the mountains. I eked out food with game I shot with my rifle. I vowed never to turn back until I had won my fortune. I was desperate now; I would win wealth or a grave in the wilderness!"

"I did strike it rich at last! I knew that the tide had turned, and I made the most of it. I worked night and day, only stopping to eat and sleep when I could no longer fight off fatigue and hunger. It was placer diggings; water was convenient and plenty. I had no one to dispute the ground with me—it was all mine, and thinking of my family, whom I had not seen for nearly three years, gave me double strength. I never knew what rest meant, until the placer suddenly gave out."

"That fact did not trouble me much. I had enough gold to live on in comfort if not in affluence, with my family. Somehow I was humbler now. I believed I could be content to return to them with a little less than the figure I had mentally chosen. And with my mule laden with gold, I took the back trail."

"All went well until I reached Denver. My first action was to write of my good fortune to my family, telling them I was at last ready to come home! I sent off the letter by a train of returning freighters, then went to rest myself. It had been long, weary months since I had had a good night's sleep."

"But some fellows heard of my good fortune, and crowded around me. To get rid of them the sooner, I consented to drink with them—at my expense, of course. I took one glass, and it made a madman of me!"

"I do not say that it was drugged. It may have been only because I was so terribly weakened, my nerves so thoroughly unstrung. All I can say for sure, is that in the morning I came to my senses, without a dollar to my name!"

"They told me I had gambled it away. They even showed me the hell where I lost my money. And when I made a row, as they called it, the dealer shot me down like a dog!"

"I did not die, though better for all the world, perhaps, had such been the case. It was months later that I recovered my senses. Where those months were spent I could never tell. Who cured me—who paid my expenses—how I came there many a long mile from Denver—all this remains a mystery to this day!"

"Once more I resumed the battle with fate. I swore to myself that I would never write to my family until I could give them good news. I swore never to return without a fortune to make amends for my long desertion. I was ashamed to go back a beggar. I could not tell them that I had lost my hard-won fortune at the gaming-table."

"Well, it was the old story over again, but without the occasional gleams of hope. Fortune never smiled on me again. Everything failed that I undertook. I starved, I even begged."

"At times I almost resolved to give over the struggle for all time. I even put the revolver to my head, with the finger almost tripping the trigger. But then a gleam of manhood came back to me. Perhaps I should say a sullen obstinacy instead. I would not yield to fate while I had strength to fight her. I would yield only to death, when it came of itself."

"I saw advertisements which contained my name. I could not answer them without violating my oath, so I changed my name to Dick Morley, and buried myself still deeper in the mountains, renewing the old, hopeless fight for wealth."

"That is enough. To go on would be but to repeat the same old story. I failed; that tells it all. In a moment of weakness, I revealed my real name to a friend, who fitted me out for another effort. Through that admission, this gentleman traced me out and brought me here. I have told my story. I make no claims. I am only Dick Morley, ragamuffin."

He concluded his recital without the slightest trace of emotion. His eyes were resting on the floor. He seemed broken down in health and spirit, the mere wreck of a man.

"All you have said may be true," said Dinorah, slowly, choosing her words with evident difficulty. "I begin to believe that you are indeed the—my long-lost father. But I cannot afford to make a mistake. My brain is sadly confused. I have suffered so much!"

"I said I made no claim," and the miner arose. "I did not come here of my own free will. I am still Dick Morley. You can forget that I ever said ought to give you a different idea. Good evening, Miss Metcalf."

Dinorah started impulsively to his side, grasping his arm and gazing intently into his eyes. Only for a moment; then she drew back, passing one trembling hand across her brow.

"I cannot see clearly—my brain is all in a whirl! Yet you must not go away—I must see you again, when I am more composed. Promise me this—promise me that you will wait until I send for you! You will promise me this?"

"If you wish," was the gentle reply. "It is not much."

Passionately Dinorah turned upon Walter Keever, crying:

"Only for you—had he come here with any other companion—it might not have been so hard to believe him!"

Walter Keever bowed gravely, his voice low and earnest:

"Am I to suffer eternally for one false move, Miss Metcalf? Can you never forget and forgive the words I uttered while mad—insane with grief and disappointment? Am I to forever banish all hope?"

Her face grew cold and distant as she replied: "You never had any real hope, with my consent. If you mean to ask will I ever alter the answer I gave you that day, I say no—ten thousand times no!"

He bowed, with real or assumed meekness. Then whispered:

"If all goes well, I expect to have news for you from your brother, to-morrow. If so, I will call. Good-evening."

Wearily Dinorah returned to her room, troubled in mind, weak in body. She thought long and soberly, then exclaimed:

"It is not true! He is not our father! It is but another vile scheme of our enemies! As I listened, my heart was ice! It failed to respond—it said *he lies—he is an impostor!*"

CHAPTER XIX.

PLAYING FOR THE LAST TRICK.

"CURSE the luck! Why don't the scoundrel come in with his report?"

"Time enough. To-day, his orders ran, and it still lacks an hour of sunset."

Walter Keever asked the question, and Colonel Darius Teemer answered it, coolly enough so far as mere words went, but his contracting brows and shifting glances told that this indifference reached but very little ways below the surface.

They were seated at opposite sides of a round-topped table such as are used in many saloons for the purpose of card-playing. This stood in the small back room of a building that showed no sign on its front, yet was one of the best-known "business houses" in Canaan. In a word, the semi-private faro room run by Tom Degnan.

As a general thing, there was a game running at "Tom's" no matter what time of day or night one struck the place; but now silence reigned. A burly negro dozed lazily in the front room; two men whispered across the table in the rear room where Tom Degnan snatched his irregular sleeps.

The names of those two men have already been mentioned. They did not seem to be in extra good humor, either with each other or the world in general. Both were frowning, both drinking oftener than they would had good humor reigned.

"But it gives no time to arrange our plans to say with the report," growled Keever, viciously biting off the tip of a cigar and striking a match.

"If you are ass enough to still count on the girl—"

Walter Keever brought his tightly clinched fist down on the table with a force that caused the bottle, glasses and box of cigars to jump and dance.

"Who first put the notion into my head, I'd like to know? Who hammered it into me that success depended altogether on her being won? Who swore at me because I balked a little, at the send-off? Wasn't it you?"

"Yes; but circumstances alter cases. You made a botch of the job when you should have succeeded. You let the chance slip through your fingers, though how you came to do it, I've never been able to make out satisfactorily!"

"Because I obeyed your instructions, and fell in love."

"Exceeded them, you mean. I told you to make love to her; I never told you to take the dose yourself. And yet—since I've come to see her, I don't know as I blame you so much. I could work up quite a little enthusiasm on her account myself—and not more than half try!"

"Go as far as you please—as a father-in-law," pointedly observed Keever. "Anything closer than that will bring you into collision with yours truly, which I hardly think you can afford, just at present."

Colonel Teemer laughed lightly.

"Never fear, boy; you and I will never be rivals in love. While we are waiting for Tom to report—"

"You are sure you can trust him?" interrupted Keever. "If he should play us false and blow to the enemy!"

"He dare not," was the composed reply. "I've got him under my thumb so tight he only kicks in the direction I say. He knows that the moment he loses my good will, off goes his head!"

Metaphorically speaking, of course. The hangman don't often decapitate, nowadays!"

"I'm anxious, naturally, for that's the only sure hold I have over her. She loves the young fellow, and to save his neck, she'd even kneel to me."

"What makes her so hot against you anyway?"

Walter Keever filled and emptied another glass.

"I'll tell you. It's time you and I fully understood each other. I've worked in your leading strings long enough. What we do after this must be done as equal partners: equal as to gains, and equal as to knowledge. You understand?"

Colonel Teemer nodded, coolly. He did not return that half-sullen, half-defiant glance. He was looking through his freshly filled glass, watching the oily beads rise to the surface, as though the future had neither cares nor dangers.

"You took me from where I was learning the trade of engineer, and fitting myself for carrying on the mine, without a word of warning. You sent me on east to find a man named Metcalf, bidding me write you all about him and his. I did so. I told you there were two in the family. I told you all I could discover; then waited for further instructions."

"They came. You bade me change my name and seek to make the acquaintance of these Metcalf people. If I could do so, I was to make the girl fall in love with me. That much done, I was to wait for further instructions from you, holding myself in readiness to marry her at a moment's notice, if bidden. This much you will admit, I suppose?"

Colonel Teemer nodded after a lazy fashion. "Why not? You are my son, and of course you can't tell a lie, even should you try to do so. Pray go on."

"Like a dutiful son, I tried to follow out your instructions to the very letter. I made furious love to Dinorah Metcalf, and almost before I suspected my danger, I was blind in love with her! I told her as much, one day. Just what terms I used, I could never remember after they passed my lips. I know that they showed her how madly I adored her, I know, too, that my ardor frightened the gentle creature, for she shrunk away and bade me leave her."

"If I had obeyed, all might have gone well, in the end; but instead of that, I pressed my suit until she grew angry and ordered me out of the house. That set my blood on fire, and—bibi! why tell all I said and did?" with a short hard laugh.

"I was fairly beside myself, and suppose I showed the bad blood that came to me from—some of my very remote ancestors, probably! Anyhow, she set up a screaming. Her brother came rushing in, and tried to toss me out of the window. Naturally I objected to this, and in the struggle that followed, I rather got the upper hand of the curled darling. I would have killed him, only for her: My bad blood, you see, colonel! As it was, I left him dead, as I then believed."

"It was a mighty close call, but I dodged the police, and kept in hiding until I saw that Fremont Metcalf was on his pins again, alive and well. I kept a close watch over them, as you ordered. Of course I dared not go to their house, as I had been doing, but I knew every move they made, for all that."

"My spy told me that at last word had come in answer to those advertisements; though he was unable to tell me who had written, he gave me the postmark. It was Canaan, as you know. I sent you word, and then, somehow, they gave me the slip. Only for that clew, I might have lost them for all time. As it was, I struck out for this place, and overtook them on the road. I kept out of their sight, and by close dodging, I got one train ahead of them. You know what followed."

Walter Keever abruptly came to a conclusion, pouring out another supply of liquor and slowly sipping it as he fastened his glowing eyes on the cold features of him whom he had called father.

"You are still determined to buckle to with this girl?"

"At any costs and all hazards—yes!"

"The sister of a murderer who suffered death by hanging?"

"Of a thousand such, for aught I care!"

"He must hang! You admit that?"

"If you insist. There's no love lost between us," was the cold, unfeeling reply.

"I do insist, most emphatically!" said Colonel Teemer, his eyes glowing, his listless manner changing to one of fierce decision. "That is the only condition on which I will lend you my aid in this romantic idea of yours. His death is positively essential to our safety. And the only thing that can save her life, is a union with you! I've gone too far to stick at trifles now."

"The same here," with dogged resolution.

"If I can't coax, I'll drive her! She hates me now, but when I tell her that I alone can clear the fair fame of her idolized brother, I reckon she'll bend. If not—I'll break her!"

Savagely came that addition. Ugly enough

Walter Keever looked just then, his eyes glowing redly, his white teeth grating together as his fist struck the table heavily.

"You gave her a hint, I believe?"

"I told her last evening, that I expected to have tidings of her brother to-night. If so, I would call on her."

Colonel Teemer opened a drawer in the table, producing pen, ink and paper. Pushing these across to Keever, he said:

"Write as I dictate, to my future daughter-in-law. When you have selected your style of address, say so."

Walter Keever thought for a brief space, then dashed off a few words, saying:

"Go on. I am ready."

"We'll make it brief and apparently to the point, but still leave ample room for conjecture. Write:

"When we parted four-and-twenty hours ago, I said I expected to have tidings of your brother. My expectations have been realized. For obvious reasons, I dare not impart that information, save by word of mouth. Please send me word, by bearer, when you can give me an interview. Your convenience is mine, of course, but it may be as well to bear mind in that the loss of an hour may be productive of evil—even fatal consequences."

"Sign that to suit yourself, while I stir up the nigger," added Colonel Teemer, rising and opening the door.

The note was sealed, directed and given to the negro, who was directed to wait for an answer. And when he had departed, Walter Keever said:

"You seem to be running this game. What is the next move?"

"That depends on the answer Mark brings back. If it is an appointment, you and I will hasten to keep it."

"You?" echoed Keever, in surprise.

"Exactly," was the cool retort. "Of course I must be on comfortable terms with my daughter-in-law that is to be."

"She'll refuse to receive you. She hates and fears you even more than she does me!"

"Because I made a little mistake and voted guilty? That is to be all wiped out, you know."

You and I—as honest men and true lovers of justice and all that rot—have been busy investigating the unfortunate affair, and we have discovered a clew to the guilty man. Or, make it stronger, if you see fit. Say that we can swear that Fremont Metcalf did not do the deed; that we can produce the real criminal at any moment she may give the word. That word, of course, she can speak only as your wife. You *saboteur*?"

Walter Keever nodded. Villainous, though the hinted-at plan was, it did not shock him in the least. Just so he won his prize, he cared little by what means it was gained.

"If she still refuses? She's got the pluck and obstinacy of the foul fiend himself!"

"Then Fremont Metcalf will pull hemp a day or so earlier. Old Forked-Lightning has him foul. When I give the word, the boys will bring him in, captured after a long hunt, you know! The gang will set up a cry for vengeance, and will make sure he don't have time for much explanation. His flight has set the better element against him, so they'll hardly interfere. Dave Long might, but he's only one man, after all, and mortal, at that. If he stops a bullet, who can help it?"

"And Tom—Old Forked-Lightning?"

"Will vanish forevermore, when his work is done. See?"

Still further the two precious villains conversed, but sufficient has been placed on record to make their evil plottings clear to the reader, and they are not such agreeable companions that we need linger longer in their company than is absolutely essential.

The negro Mark returned at length, bearing a note in answer to the one which Colonel Teemer dictated. Eagerly Walter Keever opened it, greedily he devoured its contents. And a low cry of exultation burst from his lips as he tossed it across the table to his father.

"Good as wheat! She asks me to call, at once!"

Such indeed was the purport of the note. Dinorah acknowledged the receipt of his communication, and begged him to call on her at the hotel, at nine o'clock.

Until time for setting out to keep the appointment, the villainous father and son coolly discussed their evil plans. As they fancied, they were guarded at every point. Unless by a miracle, the fair bird could not escape their meshes.

Walter Keever was still dubious about the propriety of the colonel's accompanying him, after all that had transpired to awaken the suspicions and animosity of Dinorah Metcalf against him, but the elder man was quietly obstinate.

"It is part of the game. If she is to marry you, she must know that I am your father, sooner or later. As well have it over with now," and the son sullenly yielded.

Together they went to the Occidental Hotel and asked to see Miss Metcalf. Without a word, Honest John showed them into the room, locally known as the parlor, then retreated.

Dinorah was alone, apparently waiting for them, or rather for Walter Keever, whose low

bow she acknowledged while declining to see his hand. A cold, haughty gaze was her only recognition of the intruding colonel.

"You are surprised at my audacity in coming here, Miss Metcalf," said the colonel, speaking with deep humility. "That is natural, all things considered; yet, when you hear me ex—"

"I wish to hear naught from your lips, Colonel Teemer. My business is wholly and solely with Mr. Keever."

"In this matter, Mr. Keever and I act as one," was the cool retort. "In the note which you received from him—"

"Your name was not even hinted at, or, be sure, I would never have answered it at all, much less set an hour for his coming here," sharply uttered Dinorah, partially unfolding the missive which had until then lain on the table.

Swiftly, silently, the colonel sprung forward, snatching the bit of paper from her hand, crushing it into a ball and thrusting it into his bosom. With a cry of surprised indignation, Dinorah started back, her eyes flashing, her breast heaving.

"How dare you!" she began, only to have the colonel coolly interpose:

"For your brother's sake, Miss Metcalf, we cannot be too careful. If that note was to fall into unfriendly hands, it might lead to his capture and death."

"It is true, Miss Metcalf," earnestly interposed Keever. "I beg of you to hear him quietly. It is mainly through his untiring researches that we have discovered an important clew to the real murderer of Jay Flicker. Hear him, I beg of you!"

"Not even to save my brother, whom I know to be innocent of the crime which that demon sought to fix upon him—will I have aught to do or say with him as principal!" she cried.

"All right," retorted the colonel, turning to his companion and fellow-plotter. "You take the reins, Walter. Since she meets us in that mood, never mind the preliminaries. Come down to solid business. Tell her just what she has to expect, in so many words."

Walter Keever acted on this blunt advice, saying sharply:

"Since you will have it so, listen, Dinorah! We have discovered the real murderer of Jay Flicker. We can place him in the hands of justice at an hour's notice. Swear to marry me—swear by all you hold holy that you will be my wife—and I will give you the name of the real assassin!"

"I know it already! You, Colonel Teemer," turning toward that worthy. "You are the murderer! I saw your face by the red glare of the pistol you wrenched from the hand of my poor brother! I swore to that at the inquest—I repeat the charge now! You murdered Jay Flicker!"

At that moment a door silently opened behind the two men, and Dave Long strode forward, tapping one on the arm, saying:

"I reckon I'll hev to take you in out o' the wet, kunnell! I've got a warrant that says you killed Jay Flicker!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE CLOUDS ROLL BY.

FOR one instant Colonel Teemer stood as though paralyzed by that touch and those words. Then, with a snarling curse, he freed his arm with a lightning twist, leaping back and drawing a revolver, Walter Keever closely imitating his example.

"Hands off, Dave Long!" growled the cornered villain, his black eyes glittering wickedly. "Hands off, or take the consequences! No man dare arrest me on the foolish babble of a crazy woman!"

"I've said it, an' I'll make it good," replied the marshal without flinching from the threatening weapons, making no move himself to draw one. "I ain't goin' by no woman's word in this. The warrant was swore out on the 'fession o' Tom Degnan, an'—"

The colonel was startled by the mention of that name, and as his aim faltered, Dave Long dashed in and closed with him, his motions swift and active as those of a panther. The pistol was discharged, but it never found its intended mark. And before Walter Keever could make a move to assist his father, a second door opened and Chispa Charley leaped upon him, knocking the revolver from his grasp, tripping him up and casting him headlong to the floor with terrific force. And at the same time Fremont Metcalf darted to the aid of Dave Long.

The struggle was short as it was desperate, and within ten minutes from the time of Dave Long's appearance, the two villains were captured, disarmed, their hands held together behind their backs with iron bracelets.

Colonel Teemer was fairly wild. He frothed at the mouth, as he poured forth curses and threats, and only ceased when Dave Long threatened to gag him if he continued longer to that vein.

Then he suddenly grew calm, outwardly at least. His voice was hard and cold as he spoke:

"All right. Let it go at that, for just now. But let me put it on record: each and every one

of you shall sup sorrow for this outrage! I swear it, by all men hold holy!"

Dave Long and Chispa Charley held a hurried, whispered consultation. They could hear from the growing noise outside the hotel that the pistol shot had awakened curiosity, and it was no part of their purpose to prematurely show their hand.

Chispa hastened off and soon had his trusted band of sports guarding the building, with orders to permit no one to enter, unless called for by one or other of the leaders.

Fremont and Dinorah Metcalf retired from the room.

When Chispa Charley returned to the room, he was followed by two men who bore a cot-bed. On that cot lay a man, covered from head to foot with a white cloth. As the cot was placed in the center of the room, before the prisoners, a faint groan came from that hidden figure, showing that life still lingered.

Walter Kever turned pale, an uneasy light filling his eyes, but the colonel seemed made of tougher material. A savage sneer curled his lips, his voice rung out sullenly:

"Go on with your infernal mummery! It will come my turn next!"

"Your turn is now, Darius Teemer," said Chispa Charley coldly, stepping before the prisoner whom he addressed, taking a folded paper from his bosom and opening it. "Listen to the confession of one of your own tools:

"Believing that I am fatally injured, and wishing to clear my conscience as well as may be before death, I kiss the New Testament and swear by the Living God who reigns supreme, to say nothing but the plain truth in this, my dying confession.

"Fremont Metcalf did not kill Jay Flicker. The real slayer was and is Colonel Darius Teemer. I was with him when he fired the fatal shot. By the blaze of light I saw his face. And since the deed was committed, I have heard him admit having fired the shot that killed Jay Flicker.

"I make this pledge as a simple matter of justice. No man has threatened me with punishment if I refuse. No one has promised me any sort of reward for clearing the name of Fremont Metcalf, unjustly accused of this crime. Believing that death is approaching, that I cannot survive my present injuries, and wishing to make what amends I can for a life of sin and evil, I again take solemn oath to the truth of each and every word I have caused to be written down here.

"So help me, a just and merciful God!"

"THOMAS DEGNAN."

As he ceased to read, Chispa Charley stepped forward and bending before the prisoner, held the paper so that he could see the signature plainly. It was weak and irregular, as if traced by almost powerless fingers. One swift glance the prisoner took, then growled surlily:

"It is a lie—false from beginning to end! The cur would not dare make such a vile statement were he face to face with me. He would never—"

Chispa Charley stepped back and deftly swept the white cloth from the motionless figure on the cot. And Colonel Teemer broke off with a cry that was almost a curse.

Before him lay Old Forked-Lightning!

Only for a moment. Chispa Charley gently removed the masses of long white hair from skull and face. With a dampened sponge he wiped away the cunningly drawn wrinkles and false complexion, then stepped aside. Instead of Old Forked-Lightning, the man lying on the cot was now Thomas Degnan, one of the best known gamblers and sporting men in Canaan!

As those sunken eyes looked at him, Colonel Teemer broke into a hard, forced laugh, saying:

"A counterfeit in life, you are going to die a liar, are you, Tom? Well, I reckon I can stand the racket quite as well as you can, old fellow!"

Those hollow eyes turned toward Chispa Charley, who understood the mute appeal, and held a glass of strong liquor to the lips of the dying man. The effect was almost instantly apparent. In a voice which, while not strong, was perfectly distinct and audible, Thomas Degnan spoke:

"I again make oath that what you, Chispa Charley, just now read, is true and the truth only! In addition, I wish to say that Colonel Darius Teemer hired me to take the part of Old Forked-Lightning, for the purpose of getting Fremont Metcalf in his power. I obeyed, because he held me at his mercy. I persuaded Fremont Metcalf to flee with me from the jail. I and my comrades—never mind their names—first surprised and bound the guards. Then the work was easy.

"I was to take young Metcalf to the mountains and keep him there until the man known here as Walter Kever, but who is really the son of Darius Teemer, had coaxed or forced Miss Metcalf to marry him. Then I was to throw aside my disguise, never to assume it again, and bring Fremont Metcalf back to Canaan, a prisoner, swearing that I had captured him in his place of hiding.

"The gang was to see that he was lynched without having time to utter anything dangerous. But you came," glancing up at Chispa Charley, "and the game was lost."

"What cause had Darius Teemer for hating Fremont Metcalf so intensely? Why did he wish his death?"

"Because, as son of Tucker Metcalf, he is the rightful owner of the mine Better Yet!"

With a painful gasp this startling assertion came, and as a spasm racked the frame of the dying man, Chispa Charley and Dave Long both had ened to his side. And taking advantage of this, Colonel Darius Teemer rose from his chair, dashed across the room and leaped through the window, crashing the glass and carrying the frame with him!

"Out and take him, Dave!" cried Chispa Charley, darting forward and leaping through the window.

A sharp cry came from the outside. There was a wild, excited uproar among the crowd which had been attracted by the pistol-shot. And then, bearing a limp form between them, Chispa Charley and Dave Long returned.

It was all that remained of Colonel Darius Teemer.

In making that desperate leap, his foot must have struck against the sill or casing with sufficient force to destroy his balance. He fell upon his head, and was found with a broken neck—stone dead!

An hour later in the evening, Chispa Charley was seated in company with Fremont Metcalf and his sister Dinorah.

One and all of them looked happy. And why not? The black clouds had rolled by, and they were once more in the warm sunlight.

There was much to tell, much to explain, and it was late that night before they separated. To record their words in full, would require much more space than is left for this story. Fortunately, by a judicious condensation, all that is strictly essential can be given place.

Chispa Charley, knowing that treachery was at work, after Dave Long dashed away with the stern threat which has been recorded in its proper place, collected a few men in whom he knew he could place implicit reliance, and set out in quest of Fremont Metcalf.

Guided by Providence, he stumbled on the secret retreat of the little band, just as Fremont Metcalf broke away from them in that mad cast for life and liberty. The enemy followed for a few moments, firing spitefully, but then Chispa Charley and his men also opened fire, and they had something else to look after. It was the steady aim of Chispa that brought the traitorous Old Forked-Lightning to the ground with a bullet through his lungs, and seeing that their leader was down, with half of their number to keep him company, the remainder cast aside their weapons and begged for mercy.

It was granted, and bidding his men bind them securely, Chispa Charley set out to find Fremont. But his shouts and calls remained unanswered, and as a last resource, he attempted to follow the trail of the fugitive.

This was short. It led him to a bush-grown pit or old shaft. The broken twigs and disarranged leaves told him only too clearly what had happened. In his blind haste, Fremont Metcalf had fallen down—to what?

The most important discovery of his whole life!

Not a sound came back as Chispa Charley called aloud the name of the missing man, and with sad forebodings, the prince of gamblers cut away the vine-clad bushes, letting the last rays of the setting sun strike the mouth of the deserted shaft—for such it was. On the very edge he could see where Fremont had stepped and stumbled. Beyond a doubt he was now lying at the bottom, dead? dying?

The trail ropes of the horses which the enemy had ridden were collected, tied firmly together, and sitting astride a stout stick, Chispa Charley, torch in hand, was lowered into the ruined shaft by strong and careful arms.

It was not very deep, and even before he reached the bottom he uttered a sharp cry. By the red light of his torch he distinguished the form of Fremont Metcalf lying in a doubled-up heap, apparently dead.

Only stunned, as it afterward proved to be. And when satisfied that life still lingered, Chispa Charley made him fast to the rope and gave the signal for hauling up, himself remaining behind. And most fortunate this proved to be, too.

The frail torch was dying out, and as it burned his fingers, Chispa flung it aside. As it flickered up for a moment, it showed him a ghastly spectacle—a grinning skeleton!

And then the torch died out. Only a faint light came down from above, but it was sufficient to reveal two tiny sparks near the skeleton, like the eyes of a serpent. Instead, investigation proved them to be small diamonds, set in a curiously-carved garnet, the carving representing the head of a red fox. And when he was drawn up by his mates, Chispa Charley wore that ring on his finger.

Fremont Metcalf was soon restored to consciousness. He was bruised, but with no broken bones. It was decided to remain in camp for that night. And while interchanging confidences, Chispa showed that ring.

Fremont turned pale as he listened to the story of its finding, and examined the jewel. He remembered having seen it before—ages ago it seemed.

When day dawned, the skeleton was brought to the surface. Ragged, moldering clothes still clung to it, and from them fell a leather note-book, large and strong. And in that pocket-

book was found a paper—a receipt for a large sum of money which Tucker Metcalf had paid Darius Teemer for a certain mining claim called the Better Yet.

The bones were buried, the spot marked for future finding; the prisoners and the wounded man were moved slowly back to Canaan. By the way, Thomas Degnan made full confession, and then it was arranged to entrap Darius Teemer and Walter Kever. Chispa Charley stole into the hotel by the back way, and made all preparations.

Had not that note been sent Dinorah, she would have written, one to the conspirators herself. As it was, she set an hour for their coming late enough so all arrangements could be made for their reception. What that reception was, has been described.

Dinorah also recognized the curiously-carved ring as one which her mother had often described, as one which Tucker Metcalf always wore—which he wore when he last bid her adieu.

In the minds of brother and sister there existed no doubt as to the identity of the skeleton. They firmly believed it to be the mortal remains of Tucker Metcalf, and as such the bones were buried. The receipt and title deeds of the "Better Yet" were additional proof, if any were needed.

A few more words, and we have done.

Walter Kever, against whom no actual crime could be proven, was turned loose, warned to leave the country on penalty of lynching. He obeyed, and so vanishes from our vision.

Search was made for Dick Morley, but he had disappeared, no one could say whither.

Thomas Degnan lingered on for a week longer, then died, partially comforted by the forgiveness of those whom he had sinned against. He was buried in decent style, and among those who followed him to the grave were Dinorah and Fremont, Chispa Charley and Dave Long.

As they slowly walked back from the grave, Dinorah said:

"I cannot understand it, even now! When we first knew him—when our trouble was the darkest and hope seemed all gone—he seemed so true, so noble, even while he was outwardly the roughest in his speech! I could have taken an oath he was one of Nature's noblemen! And now—to think he was playing a part all the time! Was one of our worst enemies!"

Chispa Charley cast a quick glance around them. Fremont was walking with Dave Long, and they were some little distance in advance. With a bright smile playing around his lips, he bent his head and whispered:

"Old Forked-Lightning was playing a part, but that he was ever an enemy to you or yours, I deny!"

In surprise she gazed into his smiling face. And then the glad truth flashed upon her like a revelation.

"You—you were Old Forked-Lightning!"

And she was right, though the secret remained forever a secret, as far as the inhabitants of Canaan were concerned.

Charles Hampton was in reality a detective in the employ of a noted express company. He was set to work to investigate several robberies which had been committed in the mining regions, and the better to perform his work, he chose to lead a double life. One day he was Chispa Charley. The next he was Old Forked-Lightning. Thus, without being suspected by the robbers or the public, he did good service and was the means of bringing many a criminal to justice.

When he left Dinorah and Fremont waiting for the verdict, he hastened to his rooms in a little house which he owned, to doff his disguise as Old Forked-Lightning and reappear as Chispa Charley, to rally his associates as a gambler, the better to foil the projects of the evil-disposed gang. Unluckily he was suspected and watched by Tim Degnan, an ally of the colonel. The gambler at once told Teemer of his wonderful discovery, and the busy brain of the colonel was not long in devising the game which was afterward played so desperately.

Knowing that he was the "simon pure" Old Forked-Lightning, Chispa Charley was dumfounded when his guards told him their story and implicated The Solitary. A hasty visit to his rooms revealed the disappearance of his cunning disguise, but until he bent over the wounded impostor, he never even suspected who his double could be.

With the death of Darius Teemer and the disappearance of his son, there was nothing to hinder Fremont Metcalf from taking possession of the rich mine Better Yet. He had the papers to show for it, and no one objected.

And Chispa Charley?

And Dinorah Metcalf?

Was there no wedding?

Is THAT all?

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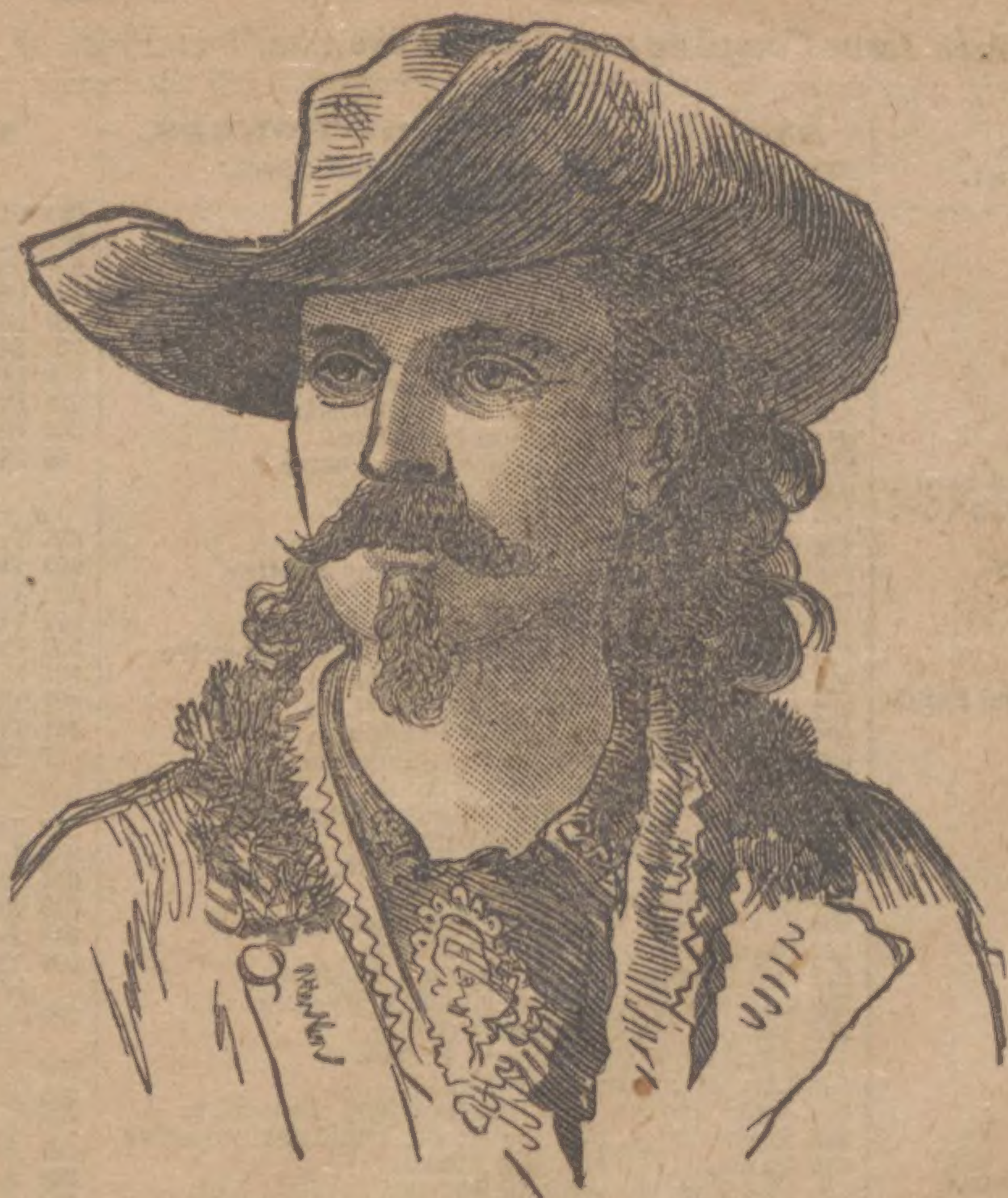
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